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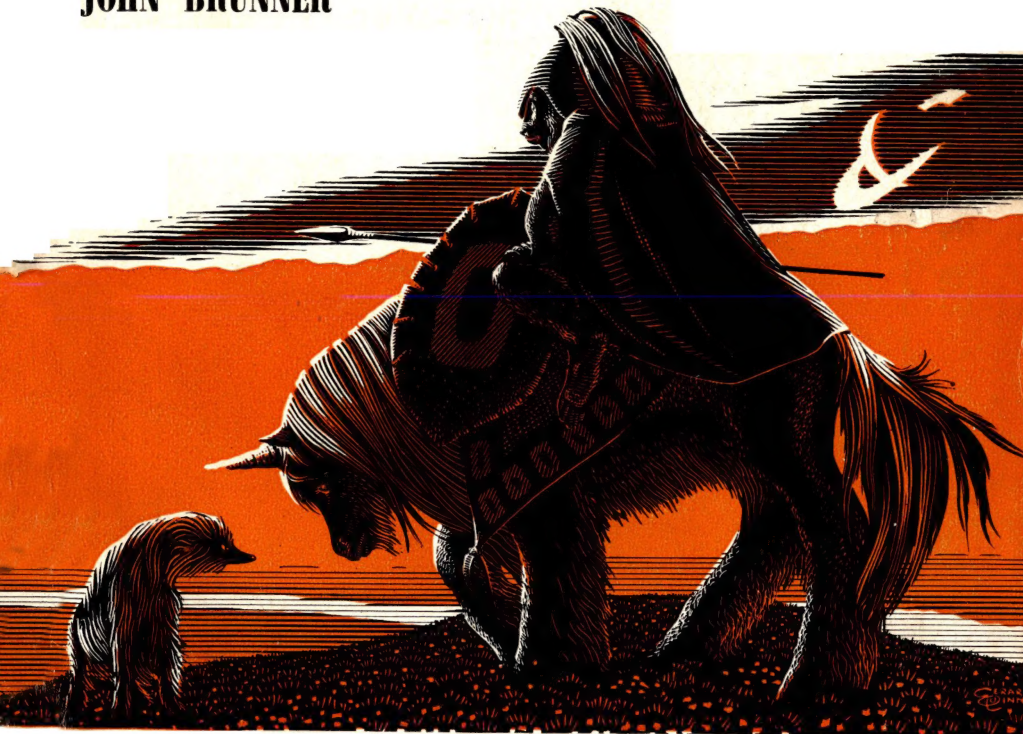
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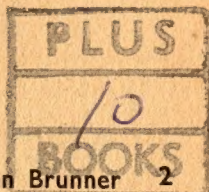
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It was a killer disease—yet the man who had it apparently refused to die. Dr. Harrow became obsessed with finding out more about his earlier movements—and then ran into a chain of circumstances which drove him to the borders of madness.

SOME LAPSE OF TIME

BY JOHN BRUNNER

o n e

It *had* to be a dream. *Had* to ! Max Harrow moaned feebly to himself, saying it over and over again, knowing that to recognise he was dreaming had always in the past released him, permitted him to wake up.

But from this he could not break free. It was as though two realities were tearing at him from opposite directions, making him think of frenzied horses. With half his consciousness he remembered clearly going to bed, falling asleep ; with the other and now stronger half, he was aware only of things remote from the familiar world.

This place . . . There were people here, a score of them perhaps, sensed rather than seen in murky gloom. There was a feeling of dank coldness mingled with a smell of stale sweat and a reek of smoke. There was a fire burning, and no chimney carried the smoke away. There were flickering lamps that cast a dim yellow light. The people were clothed in tattered furs, dirty, hungry and in despair. They were in a building patched together from a ruin ; logs with the bark still on them had been laid across the stumps of broken brick walls, and the lamps

occasionally showed how the smoke had blackened the white cut ends of the timber. Beyond, outside, one pictured snow and frost, and wind with an edge like a razor.

Of all the huddled people, there was one who knelt at the centre, bright-eyed, skeletally thin, in clothing that seemed glazed with dirt. A child elsewhere in the place wailed with hunger, and then was too weak to go on crying. The kneeling man noticed nothing. His hands were cupped before him, and a little thing rested in his palms. Max Harrow could see it clearly, and his trained knowledge told him what it was : a bone from a human finger.

Abruptly, it was as though the kneeling man were staring straight into his face—glowering down on him from a few feet distance—and ordering : *feel our pain, suffer as we are suffering . . .*

The hungry baby screamed again, and the scream blended into a shrilling noise, and someone seemed to be shaking Max Harrow and speaking angrily to him. He tried to cower away into unconsciousness, and came awake, sweat-damp, trembling.

“Max ! Max, wake up !”

Oh, God. A real voice belonging to the real world. The relief was terrifying. He threw his arms around the warm comfort of the body leaning over him, and murmured his wife’s name.

“Diana, I’ve had another nightmare—oh, I’m so glad you woke me !”

But she repulsed his attempt to draw her down to him. She pushed at him insistently.

“Max, there’s somebody at the door !”

“What ?” Foolish, disoriented, he let his arms fall back beside his head on the pillow, and opened his eyes and his mind to the world about him. The bedside light was on, shedding a peach coloured glow through its shade, and rain was drumming with wintry fingers on the outside of the house. The shrilling sound came again, and continued longer than before, and he understood it to be the bell of the front door.

So that accounted for the way the child’s cry had changed, and maybe the fact that Diana was trying to wake him explained his sense of being ordered to do something, and the noise of rain and wind conveyed the impression he had had of hostile winter. These things he told himself, verbalising them carefully.

But they didn't explain the horrifying immediacy of the dream, or its aura of actuality.

"Max!" Diana's face was drawn with tiredness under her tangled brown hair, and dark rings underlined her large brown eyes. He thought suddenly of the reasons for her look of weariness and anxiety, and pulled himself together. He got out of bed, fumbling with his toes for his slippers.

"Who the hell can it be, anyway?" he said, blinking in an attempt to focus the room. "What's the time?"

"Half past one."

"The hell with them." He stood up and shrugged his dressing-gown around him and went shivering down the stairs.

At first he could hardly see beyond the frame of the door; it was very dark out there, and the rain came streaming off the trees. Then the shape against the background came clearer, and he recognised a policeman in a cape glistening with wet.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," he said in a bluff voice. "You're a doctor, though, aren't you?"

Max cursed under his breath. Not being in general practice, he had no sign outside the house from which the constable could have learned his profession. He said shortly, "Yes. Why?"

"I heard a disturbance a few minutes ago and came in to see what it was. I found a man collapsed alongside your car."

Of course. The car. There was a DOCTOR sticker on the window which saved him parking problems near the hospital. Max sighed.

"A tramp by the look of him," the constable went on. "I think he's seriously ill."

A tramp . . . Max grunted and stood back from the door. "Let me get a coat and some proper shoes," he said. "We'll get him inside and call an ambulance."

"Thank you, sir. But he's only collapsed—I don't think he's injured. I can probably carry him indoors by myself if you'll let me. If you can just call the ambulance, that'll be enough."

"Oh—" Max hesitated. Then he wiped his face. "If you're sure you can manage . . ."

"Certain, thank you, sir. He's not much more than skin and bone."

"All right."

The constable turned away towards the car-port alongside the house, and Max went back into the hallway and picked up

the phone. He dialled 999 and waited for the answer ; when it came, he asked for an ambulance for his address.

He was just putting the phone down again when Diana came to the head of the stairs, dressing-gown clutched around her with one hand, to lean on the banister and call down anxiously.

"What is it, Max?"

"Policeman." He pushed back his hair from his eyes. "A tramp collapsed in the car-port. You go back to bed, honey. I've rung for an ambulance—we're just going to bring him inside till it gets here."

She fastened the dressing-gown and began to come down the stairs. "It's no good my staying in bed," she said resignedly. "I'd just lie and worry about you. Max, isn't there something that can be done about these dreams of yours?"

"I'll—find out. I will." He spoke the facile words with his mouth gone dry.

"Please, Max. Please really do it, not just talk about it." She was at the foot of the stairs now, picking up an old coat of Max's which he had left hanging over the banister and moving to spread it on a couch in the lounge.

"This'll do to put the tramp on," she added as she pulled it straight.

"Here he is, sir."

The policeman's voice made Max swing around. He was in the doorway with the tramp over his shoulders in a fireman's lift.

"Bring him in here, officer," Max said. "I rang for the ambulance." He stood aside from the door of the lounge.

As soon as the tramp had been laid down on the couch, Max made a quick examination. The constable had said the man was mostly skin and bone ; it was no exaggeration. Seldom had Max seen anyone in such appalling physical condition. The tramp's legs and arms were pipestem-thin and his hands were blue with cold. That was hardly surprising ; he proved to be clad in nothing but the ancient and dirty raincoat and the cracked rubber boots which were his visible garments.

Odd. Max had always imagined tramps as wearing layer on layer of clothing, afraid to throw away any item before it reduced to shreds. He frowned.

While Diana sat dully in a chair across the room, and the constable hovered near the couch, he checked his first findings

again. There was something else peculiar about the man besides his skimpy clothing.

"What's wrong with him, sir?" the constable asked at length. "Starvation, is it?"

"I'm not sure yet." Max palpated the bloated pumpkin of the tramp's belly with careful fingers, then pushed back his lips, noting the poor condition of his teeth. Against the gums and in the gaps where teeth were missing there were scraps of food, some apparently fresh but mostly decaying. His breath stank. His skin was slightly jaundiced, it seemed—though he was so dirty it was hard to tell what his natural colour ought to be. His cheeks and jaw were covered with a stubbly beard; his hair was long and greasy, and patches of his scalp were bald.

Max drew a deep breath. With shaking hands, because million-to-one chances didn't often enter his life, he thumbed back the tramp's eyelids and stared at the motionless whites beneath. They were tinged with an unpleasant pus-green.

Under his breath he said, "But it *can't* be . . ."

"What can't be?" Diana asked dispiritedly. Max caught himself. It would be far better not to mention that the man was suffering from this of all conceivable diseases.

"Uh—nothing, honey. It looks like a rather rare complaint, that's all. But I can't be certain yet."

There was the noise of a vehicle drawing up outside. Diana got to her feet.

"That'll be the ambulance. I'll let the men in."

Max's next surprise of the night was a more pleasant one; when the men came through the door with their stretcher, he recognised them as being from his own hospital. They exchanged wry greetings with him as they made to pick up the tramp.

Coming to a decision, Max turned to his writing-bureau.

"Who's on duty tonight, Jones?" he asked the nearer of the new arrivals.

"Dr. Faulkner, sir," the man answered over his shoulder.

Excellent. Max uncapped a pen and took a sheet of his personal notepaper. He wrote:

Dear Gordon—You'll probably think I'm obsessed by what happened to Jimmy, but it looks to me very much as though this tramp who's been sprung on me in the middle of the night is a case of the same thing. Look at the whites of his eyes, for instance. But if it's true, it's incredible! I'd have said an adult case of

heterochylia was out of the question, yet this man must be in his thirties or forties.

Behind him he heard Jones say, "What's that he's got in his hand?"

"I don't know," his companion answered. "But he's clinging like death to it—ah, there we are."

Max glanced around. The ambulanceman, having pried the tramp's fingers open, was triumphantly displaying what he had found. Max's heart sank, and the world swam dizzily about him.

The object was unmistakeable. It was a human finger-bone.

t w o

For the rest of the night Max had no sleep at all. Partly he was kept awake by fear of returning to the nightmare world he had visited earlier—and not then only, but several times in the past few weeks.

Since, in fact, what had happened to Jimmy.

And that was the other reason why he could not go to sleep again. He sat up in bed smoking and staring into darkness, listening to the rain beat on the windows, the soft rhythm of Diana's breathing, and the hammering of his own heart.

The more he thought about the tramp's condition, the more he felt that the episode had been unreal. It was absurd to think that a man could reach his thirties or forties when suffering from the same disease that had stricken Jimmy before his birth.

The image of the tiny limp body of his son haunted him; he seemed to see it against the darkness, eyes open accusingly, the horrible greenish layer which filmed the white magnified by imagination into a phosphorescent glow like the gleam of rotting fish.

He almost cried out, but stopped himself in time. The loss of Jimmy had preyed too badly on Diana's mind for him to want to have to explain why it was he stayed wakeful.

It was only rather recently that the nature of such diseases as that which had killed Jimmy had been understood. The discovery had to wait for a clearer understanding of the metabolism of the body, and the exact interaction of the myriad chemical compounds on which it depended. These were absurd and paradoxical afflictions in which wholesome food turned to poison because of some flaw in the chemistry of the

digestive system—of the liver, kidneys, or some other vital organ.

A child might be poisoned by its own mother's milk, or by an innocuous vegetable like spinach, or by a vitamin, or even by one of the normal derivative compounds into which the digestive fluids converted food. Then followed cretinism, or paralysis, or simple, merciful death.

Some of these diseases had been given names before they were understood ; puzzled doctors had coined descriptive terms and been compelled to leave it at that. Others had been named with greater precision, as comprehension of the underlying causes grew and—like phenylketonuria, for instance—bore even in these labels an attempt to explain what they were.

The disease which had killed Jimmy was one of the latest to be identified. Max knew the man who had given it its name—had studied under him, in fact. He called it heterochylia because the poison which jaundiced the skin, discoloured the whites of the eyes and eventually so disturbed the nervous system that death resulted, was found in the chyle—the fluid which transfers ingested fats from the small intestine to the bloodstream. Jimmy's chyle had been typical : thick, discoloured, foul-smelling at the autopsy. A compound had appeared in it which made it biologically useless.

How such diseases occurred : that too was beginning to be known. They were among the statistically most likely consequences of radiation gene-damage ; a mere nudge could disturb the delicate structure responsible for conveying the complex information about normal metabolism.

What to do about such diseases : little by little, patient men were piecing facts together. There were some children who were growing up happy and healthy—provided they were never allowed to take milk or milk-products. Others were condemned never to touch particular fruits or vegetables, or even sugar. With lifelong watchfulness they could be given the chance to survive.

In heterochylia, a common variety of fat was turned rancid during digestion and became a substance which the body had no technique to handle. In trying to explain its effect to Diana, Max had compared it to pouring thick gum into a delicate machine ; for a while the machine would run slower and slower, and at last it would be so clogged that it stopped. It wasn't exactly gum, but it clogged the body.

Jimmy had died before the particular fat was identified. On a diet which excluded all fats, whether in milk, or meat, or butter, or nuts—all fats—he might have survived. But he would probably have been mentally affected in any case. It was better this way.

But the incredible coincidence that the tramp had come out of the night and been seen by perhaps the only doctor in all London apart from specialists connected with the investigation of heterochylia who could recognise his affliction and warn the hospital staff against killing him with kindness . . . that made his mind reel.

That—and the finger-bone.

He reached out to the bedside table and found the grisly little relic. He turned it between his hands and went on wondering.

The tramp had eaten ; his belly was full with a large and recent meal, and that meal had contained fats deadly to him. But to have lived so long, he must have been instructed to avoid fats. Where had he been ? In an institution of some kind ? Even that didn't offer an adequate explanation. Heterochylia was newly identified ; it was absurdly improbable that even in a hospital somewhere he would have been given an absolutely fat-free diet.

This finger-bone . . . The top of a middle finger, with a slight curve in it like his own. That meant nothing. The fingers of very few people were quite straight. Still, this was another disturbance for his already confused mind, and it ran eerily over his consciousness, planting footprints of insanity.

He had been able to explain away many things from his evil dream : the cry of the child, the sense of being spoken to and ordered to suffer. But this bone now in his hand was so precisely like the one he had seen resting on the palm of the kneeling man that he was physically frightened.

He got up early and made his own breakfast, leaving Diana asleep. He put a note beside the bed where she would be sure to see it, and drove through streets only sparsely dotted with traffic. He was an hour ahead of his usual time when he reached the hospital, and moved through corridors loud with clinking breakfast dishes in search of Gordon Faulkner, who had been on night duty.

He found him writing up his report in the house office, and sipping a cup of tea. He was, fortunately, alone. Max closed

the door behind him and nodded in answer to his surprised greeting.

"Couldn't sleep after that tramp was found," he said. "I thought I'd come down early and see what became of him."

Faulkner pushed back his chair and took off his horn-rimmed glasses to wipe them. He was a large-boned man with sandy hair, some years older than Max.

"The note you sent down with him shook me rigid," he said. "I thought at first you'd slipped a cog somewhere. Then I took a look at him, and I saw you were absolutely right. How did it happen, anyway?"

"A policeman was passing the house and heard a noise; when he went to investigate, there was this tramp. My guess is he'd eaten a meal early in the evening, and it had gone bad on him."

"That's right," Faulkner nodded. "Directly I saw the green in his eyes and smelled his breath, I had his stomach pumped out. The contents were consistent with a large meal of fish and chips taken about four or five hours earlier. The fat they were fried in would be enough to knock him over."

"Is he going to live?"

"For a while. The Prof is due in this morning at ten. I think we'd better wait for his verdict. He's on glucose drip, by the way. And here's something else odd. Apart from being three-quarters starved, it doesn't look as though his condition has ever given him really bad trouble."

"If it had, he'd be dead—or at least his brain would have been so seriously affected he wouldn't even be able to cope with a tramp's way of life." Max repressed a shudder. "What do you make of him, Gordon?"

"A complete mystery," Faulkner said. "If I hadn't seen him myself, I wouldn't believe in his existence."

"Has he talked? Or have you found any clue to identity?"

"No. You'd hardly expect to find him carrying papers, would you?" Faulkner hesitated. "Or would you? I don't know much about tramps. I suppose they have to carry some kind of documents. But apart from the coat and boots we took off him, there was nothing at all. As for talking—"

He broke off, frowning. Max leaned forward.

"Yes? Go on!"

"Well, it's much too early to say, of course, because he's very weak and shocked. But he regained consciousness after we

emptied his stomach and got some glucose into his system, and he did say a few words to me. And they seemed to be in a foreign language. I couldn't get any of it. We'll try again when the Prof is here ; I think he'd best be allowed to rest undisturbed until then. Or do you want to have a look at him?"

Max hesitated. Then he said, " No, I'll wait for the Prof."

" Just as you like." Faulkner swallowed the last of his tea. " Oh, when I said there was nothing on him, I forgot—there was this." He pulled open a drawer of the desk at which he sat, and took out a large envelope with a scribbled note on it. From the envelope he produced a big old rusty sheath-knife, the handle broken and a quarter-inch chipped off the tip of the blade.

" That was tucked in his right boot," Faulkner finished.

Max turned the knife over and gave it back. There was nothing obviously unusual about it. He said, " There was also—uh—this."

He felt in the side pocket of his jacket and found the bone. Giving it to Faulkner, he said, " What do you make of it ?"

" Phalanx," Faulkner said. " Top joint of a left middle finger, I'd say. Oh ! Was this the one Jones mentioned, which they found clutched in his hand ?"

" That's right."

" Hm-m-m." Faulkner stared at the improbable object. " You know, when Jones told me about it, the only rational explanation I could think of was that it must be the tramp's own. But both his hands are intact." He tossed the bone up in the air, caught it as it fell, and passed it back. " Or else maybe it's the one he took off somebody in a fight, and kept as a souvenir. This knife of his has blood on it, did you notice?"

" Has it ?" Max started. He took the knife again and inspected it more closely. " Why, so it has," he added, seeing that although the rusty blade had been wiped, there was a dark crust around the base of the handle.

" Most likely it's not significant," Faulkner shrugged. " He may have used it to gut a stolen chicken, or anything. Anyway, I'm afraid there's more to be done today than discuss one peculiar tramp."

Max took the hint and rose. " I'll go and see if sister can let me have a cup of that tea," he said. " When the Prof gets here, he can do the worrying."

He wished achingly that he really could shrug off the mystery so easily.

t h r e e

"Looks as though you must be acquiring something of a reputation, Max !" boomed Professor Lensch. His voice was out of all proportion to his baby-doll face and short chubby figure.

Turning away from the bed in which the tramp lay with eyes wide like a startled rabbit's, he added, "I'm only glad it wasn't me he disturbed in the middle of the night."

"What do you mean, Prof ?" Max said.

Lensch nodded at the nurse to tidy the bed and put screens around it again, and walked a few paces down the ward. Max fell in beside him.

"Well, exactly what I say !" Lensch went on in a lower tone. "Fish and chips he had inside him, according to the report. The fat would have killed him if he'd been allowed to go on digesting it. And the odds are a thousand to one against any out-of-touch GP making the right diagnosis. It looks as if he was making for your place, doesn't it ? Heh-heh !"

"That's not funny," Max said.

Instantly Lensch was contrite. He put his hand on Max's arm. "I'm so sorry, Max. Somehow I keep forgetting it was your boy it happened to."

Max shrugged. The nurse came out from between the screens surrounding the tramp's bed, and Lensch turned to her.

"Nurse ! Has he said nothing at all, the whole morning since he woke up ?"

The nurse nodded. "Apart from murmuring a few words in his sleep at half past eight or so—that was just before he woke—he hasn't said a thing. And there's something distinctly odd about him even now he is awake."

"Yes ?"

"I think he must be a foreigner. We get Cypriots here sometimes who don't speak any English at all—mostly women. He doesn't appear to understand any of what's said to him, the same as the Cypriots. He hears it all right, but it's just noise."

"Yes." Lensch compressed his pinkly shining lips. "That may perhaps be an effect of the heterochylia on the brain or again it may not. Thank you, nurse. Keep Dr. Harrow informed if there's any change in the man's condition, won't you ? Now, Max, I must have a short discussion with you."

He took Max's arm again and hurried him along the ward to the sister's office. Once inside, with the door closed, he swung round to face his companion.

"Max, what have you *found* here? This man is totally impossible! Who, *who* has enabled him to keep alive? One glass of milk, one piece of bread and margarine, one rasher of bacon—he ought to have been dead from such a cause when he was two years old!"

"I know," Max said. "I gave the dietician instructions, by the way—plain dry bread, porridge without milk, tea without milk, salad and a very little lean meat when he begins to improve. I think we can hold him now, don't you?"

Lensch rubbed his chin. "I think so," he agreed judiciously. "Be careful with the meat—check his reaction to not more than an ounce or two before permitting it regularly. We shall maintain the glucose drip today, of course. This is incredible, incredible!" He thumped his plump fist on a nearby table. "Max, I wish I could stay all day with you and examine him properly. As I cannot, I must tell you what I want you to do and rely on you to carry it out. Here, give me paper and I will make you a long list."

It was a very long list, but somehow in the course of the day Max found time to organise all the necessary tests and additional examinations. Lensch's opinion—also his own—was amply confirmed.

He was sitting in the ward office at four that afternoon, looking at the report of a urinalysis across which the lab technician had scrawled, "That's heterochylia all right!" when the phone rang and he picked it up.

"B Ward," he said absently. "Sister's not here, I'm afraid."

"Dr. Harrow?" the switchboard girl said. "I have an outside call for you. It's the police."

"Police?" Max came blankly back to the present. "Oh, very well."

A moment's silence; then a man's voice came on the line.

"Sorry to trouble you, Dr. Harrow. Sergeant Cloudby here, from Rampion Road police station. You may perhaps be able to help us."

"I'll try."

"It's about the tramp that one of our constables found early this morning, in your car-port—isn't that right? I believe he was taken to the hospital where you yourself work."

"Correct," Max said. He fumbled out a cigarette and put it between his lips. "In fact, he's right here in this ward."

"Did he by any chance have a knife on him?"

Max paused in the act of bringing his lighter up to the cigarette. After a moment he said in a changed voice, "Yes, as a matter of fact he did. Why?"

"We've had a report from—uh—" Papers rustled at the other end of the line. "Ah yes. From Dr. Scoreman, just a couple of roads away from where you live. His Alsatian dog, which he lets out last thing before going to bed, didn't come in as usual last night. And his wife found it this morning hidden among some bushes with its throat cut."

Max didn't say anything for a moment. Scoreman as it happened, was his and Diana's G.P.

"Are you there, sir?"

"Yes, I'm still here. I know Dr. Scoreman, and his dog. This is a very nasty thing to have happened, but why do you connect it with the tramp who was found at my place?"

"Just a guess, sir," Sergeant Cloudby said apologetically. "You see, it occurred to me that perhaps this tramp was ill, and looking for a doctor to help him, and he didn't dare to go in at Dr. Scoreman's after the dog incident." The voice briskened. "You say he did have a knife. Any blood on it?"

"Yes—some at the base of the handle, quite dry by the time I saw it, of course."

"Thank you." A pen scratched. "Any on his clothes?"

"Frankly, sergeant, the coat which was all he had on was so filthy it wouldn't show without close inspection." Max bit his lip; there was something about what Cloudby had said which itched at his mind. Abruptly, he realised what it was. If he hadn't lost so much sleep last night, he would have spotted it immediately.

"Sergeant, you may have come to the right conclusion, but for the wrong reason, you know."

"How's that, sir?"

"There's nothing outside my house to show I'm a doctor. I'm not in general practice, you see. And it was much too dark for anyone in the roadway to see the sticker on my car's windscreen, which your constable noticed."

"I see. That is odd." Cloudby hesitated. "Would it be convenient if I sent someone around to the hospital, sir? You have the knife, I take it?"

"Well, it's probably in the ward here—we keep patients' belongings sealed up for them to claim on recovery. Apart from having the blood tested to see if it matches the dog's, though, I don't imagine it'll help very much to send anyone around."

"Is the man unconscious, then?"

"No—he's been awake all day. He's weak, but getting better. But the point is, he doesn't appear to speak English." Max hadn't meant to phrase it that way; his tiredness was definitely catching up on him. "I mean, he doesn't understand what's said to him. It's probably a side-effect of the rather rare complaint he's suffering from."

Rather rare, he glossed wryly, was a classic understatement.

"Nonetheless, sir, if you'll allow me I'd like to send a man around. He'll be in plain clothes, of course. And even if it's against regulations to part with the knife, he can take some scrapings of the blood from it, at least."

"Oh—very well." Max made his decision in the same moment that he realised he had a request in turn to make of Cloubdy. He was surprised Lensch hadn't included it in his list. "By the way, sergeant, you might be able to do me a favour. This tramp has a very rare disease, as I mentioned—not a notifiable one, not contagious at all. But we should like to know where he came from, and he can't tell us himself. Will you be making inquiries in the neighbourhood?"

"We've already made some, sir. Just to find out if anybody heard the dog being killed."

"You haven't established the tramp's movements, by any chance?"

"Very roughly. Just a second." Papers rustled again. "Ah, here we are. A Mrs. Groves, in Bebdene Avenue, told us she was visited by a tramp fitting the description at about nine or half past—yesterday evening, that is. She said, 'He sounded like a foreigner and I couldn't understand what he was trying to say, and I was a bit scared because he looked wild and fierce, so I gave him some fish and chips left over from supper and he went away.' That sounds like the same man, I think."

"It does indeed. My colleague found the fish and chips when he emptied his stomach on his arrival at the hospital." Max closed his eyes trying to visualise the map of the area near his home. Bebdene Avenue—no, he couldn't quite place it, though he knew it wasn't more than a mile or two away.

"Excellent," Cloudby said. "Well, I'll get my man around to the hospital right away. And thank you for your co-operation."

Before leaving for home, Max paid one last visit to the tramp's bedside. He was still lying there inert ; his eyes were shut when Max first looked in, but he opened them after a few moments. He looked weak and miserable. His jaundiced skin was tight on his bones, like shrunken clothing. Washing his face and trimming his beard had revealed several old scars—like claw-marks, but probably made by a woman's nails.

"Who the devil are you, anyway?" Max said under his breath.

The man didn't say anything. He licked his lips and eyed Max warily.

An old legal phrase crossed Max's mind : *mute of malice*. Was he simply scared of any kind of authority ? Some tramps were, Max seemed to remember. And especially if he had in fact killed Scoreman's dog, he wouldn't want to say anything which might give him away—by extension, anything at all.

Yet this Mrs. Groves, in Bebdene Avenue, had said she could not understand what he had said to her. A foreigner ? How could someone eke out a tramp's existence in Britain today without even a smattering of English ? The idea was absurd.

But then, so was the man's presence here.

Nothing more could be done until tomorrow, when presumably the police would notify him about the blood from the knife. Max shrugged and turned away. A pity about Scoreman's dog, he thought. It had been an exceptionally fine pedigree Alsatian, police-trained—

He checked himself. How in the devil's name had a human wreck like this tramp managed to overpower and kill a police-trained dog ?

He kept an atlas of London in the car. Before driving away from the hospital he located Bebdene Avenue on the map, and found it was indeed close to his way home. He decided to go along it and see if he could reconstruct the most likely route for the tramp to have taken if he proceeded to Scoreman's home and then to Max's own.

He spent much longer on the task than he had intended, and arrived more than half an hour late, in a very thoughtful mood. Diana called to him from the kitchen where she was preparing dinner, and came to kiss him hello.

"A most awful thing happened, Max," she said. "The Scoremans' dog—did you hear about it?"

He nodded absently and followed her into the kitchen. Taking a chair, he said, "Yes, the police rang me up. Apparently it was the tramp who did it—the one who was found here."

She let a spoon fall with a clatter, and stared at him. "Oh, how awful, Max ! Thank goodness he collapsed so he couldn't do any harm !"

"He's a very sick man," Max said, passing a weary hand over his face. "Do you know what he's got, honey?"

She shook her head, waiting.

"The same thing that took Jimmy."

"Oh, but—but surely, that's impossible." She forced an unreal smile and shook back her hair as she picked up the spoon she had dropped.

"I'd have said so. But there he is, and Prof Lensch confirms my diagnosis and says he can't believe it either. He won't talk and apparently he can't understand English, so we have no idea how he came to be here. Or even how he managed to stay alive to his present age."

She sat down on another chair facing him, turning the spoon between her hands.

"And something still crazier !" Max said, slapping the top of the kitchen table. "The police thought he came here to ask for help. They found the woman who gave him the meal that nearly killed him, over in Bebdene Avenue, and their idea was that he was going to knock on Bob Scoreman's door and ask him, but was afraid to when he'd killed the dog. But this just doesn't fit ! I drove home by way of Bebdene Avenue, and from there to the Scoreman's place, and then back here. I never realised before how thick this district is with doctors. I counted five plates in clear sight of the road. And it's *my* home he makes for—as the Prof says, the one doctor in a thousand who could spot his trouble and save his life."

He couldn't meet her eyes. A haunted expression came to his face ; he put one fist in the other palm and pressed his hands hard together as though to stop them shaking.

After a while Diana said, "You didn't sleep last night, did you ? I saw the ashtray by the bed when I woke up."

"No. No, I didn't get much rest."

"Did you finally make up your mind to do something about your dreams?"

"No. I've been too busy."

"Max!" She leaned forward pleadingly. "Max, it's not fair to me—have you thought about that? After Jimmy . . . Well, it just isn't kind to make me suffer for you too. I can see what the nightmares and lack of sleep are doing to you, and it's about time you saw it yourself. How much use are you going to be to your patients if you don't have your nightmares cleared up?"

He pulled himself to his feet. "If you'd stop nagging me about it, that might help too!" he said savagely, and went out of the room, leaving her staring after him with a hurt and puzzled look.

four

The dream came back that night and the following nights. It was the same in all essentials, though little details differed, such as the crying child which was often absent. It hadn't changed materially since the first time it came to him, the day following Jimmy's death.

At the hospital, the tramp lay—mute of malice—in his bed. His lack-lustre eyes, from which the greenish tinge was slowly fading roved about, but he scarcely turned his head even now that the screens had been removed and he could see the other patients. Men in the neighbouring beds complained that he made them feel uncomfortable; he was an eerie creature, one of them said. Max arranged for him to be moved up the end of the ward, near the wall; he would have liked to put him by himself, but there was no vacant room available.

The police reported that the blood on the knife matched the dead dog's; Max called on Bob Scoreman and invited him to the hospital to see the tramp. Scoreman was as astonished as Max himself had been to think that a half-starved weakling such as this could tackle a police-trained Alsatian, and indeed appeared not to believe it was true. He listened sympathetically to what Max told him, and promised that he would ask the police to avoid taking the matter any further.

Lensch, excited beyond measure by the phenomenon presented to him, kept closely in touch with the tramp's

progress. He was developing an appetite, and his pipestem limbs were filling out, his face was losing its turnip-ghost look. His eyes were no longer permanently wide with alarm, and the night nurses reported that he had stopped talking in his sleep. But he showed no signs of initiative—he could scarcely rouse himself to answer the call of nature.

Eerie. Yes.

The sixth day after the tramp had been found slumped against Max's car, Gordon Faulkner pushed open the door of the Ward B office, looking for the sister, and found Max sitting at the desk with his head in his hands. He pushed the door shut quietly behind him and came over.

"Max? Something wrong?"

Max raised a pale face to him, and pulled himself together. "Oh—hullo, Gordon. No, nothing in particular. Just tiredness and worry."

"About anything?" Faulkner perched himself on the edge of a table and offered cigarettes; Max accepted one and brought out his lighter.

He hesitated over his answer. Then he reminded himself that Faulkner was as much of an old friend as he had on the hospital staff, and sighed. "Partly it's that tramp—I can't get him out of my mind. Partly it's Diana—since we lost Jimmy, she's been very upset, and I haven't been able to do much to help her relax. We had a flaming row this morning before I left home." He took a long drag on his cigarette and waved it vaguely through a cloud of exhaled smoke. "I can't even remember what started it now. And then I get *this*!"

He snatched up an internal memo form from the desk before him and thrust it towards Faulkner, who turned it around the right way and read it.

"A pretty distinguished patient," he said neutrally. "What is he—Secretary for War, isn't he?" His eyes were still on the paper. "Observation prior to operation—oh, that leg of his; I see. He limps, doesn't he? Seen him on newsreels. By the look of this, I imagine he's going to have to have it off."

"I wish it was his head," Max said.

For a long moment Faulkner gazed at him in astonishment. At last he said, "Max, that's not like you. What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say !" Max got to his feet and began to pace back and forth in the narrow office. "Don't you realise that's one of the bastards who killed my son ?"

Faulkner was silent, embarrassed. Max halted before him, jabbing the cigarette through the air at his face.

"Well, isn't it true ? Lensch says so, Greifer says so, over in the States Polen says it and Warrington says it and Bengelberg says it—all these congenital metabolic disorders like heterochylia can be attributed to radiation damage of the developing embryo. And bastards like him put the radiation there, with their bloody nuclear firework shows !"

"Now just a second, Max," Faulkner said. "It's not the only source of radiation, you know. Gentry showed—"

"Do you think I let Diana have X-rays during pregnancy ?" Max cut in. His voice was rising in pitch and shaking with the intensity of his emotion. "I wouldn't be such a bloody fool ! I know about Gentry's work all right, and so by now should everybody in the profession. No, you can't shrug it off like that, Gordon."

"Then how are you going to explain what your tramp's got?" Faulkner said icily. "He's in his late thirties or early forties, isn't he ? Forty years ago there weren't any nuclear tests going on. Has he got heterochylia or hasn't he ? If he has, it's a congenital condition."

Max put his cigarette to his lips with a trembling hand. After a few moments' silence, he said, "I guess you're right. Sorry I blew my top."

"That's okay. It must have been a hell of a shock to lose the kid—you ought to have taken some time off to recover from it instead of working through."

Max reached out and took the memo from Faulkner's hand. He dropped it back on the desk.

"It was getting that which triggered it off. I'd been hoping all week to get the tramp in a private room for a while, and here was this one coming vacant by a miracle for at least another week—and Mister bloody Wilfred FitzPrior decides to move in. Why's he coming here, anyway ? I'd have thought he'd go to the London Clinic."

"Isn't he a friend of the Prof's ?" Glad to hear Max becoming calmer, Faulkner tapped ash into a tray on the desk.

"I hope not," Max said. "I didn't think the Prof had friends like that—"

The door opened, and an excited nurse slipped into the room. "Dr. Harrow!" she said. "The tramp—he's started to talk! He just said something to me!"

Faulkner stood up with an exclamation. Max crushed his cigarette into the ashtray.

"What did he say?" he demanded.

The nurse shook her head. "I couldn't understand it. But he said it quite clearly and distinctly. It must have been in a foreign language."

"Come on," Max snapped at Faulkner, and made for the door.

It was perfectly true. The tramp seemed to have recovered enough courage to talk at last, and was willing enough to respond to Max and Faulkner. But none of what he said sounded even remotely like any language they knew between them; it wasn't English, French, German, any of the Scandinavian languages or Russian. They fetched a West African nurse who spoke Yoruba, Ashanti and Hausa; it wasn't any of those. Nor was it Greek—there was a Cypriot patient ambulant in the ward, and he confirmed that.

The last chance of determining what it was immediately vanished when they fetched Jones, the ambulance attendant, and he ruled out Welsh.

And yet there was a tantalising familiarity about it. The rhythm, the structure, the coloration of the vowels, all suggested that the answer, when they found it, would prove blindingly obvious.

"There's only one thing for it," Max said at last. "We'll have to get at the words for a few simple objects, note them down, and ask someone. The Bible Society, perhaps."

"Wouldn't it be easier to make him learn English?" the nurse said practically.

"If he's been living as a tramp in this country for as long as his clothes suggest, and hasn't picked up even a minimal vocabulary, then he probably won't be willing to start learning now," Max said. "Let's see if we can get his name, at any rate."

The tramp's eyes flickered from face to face as he listened, but he showed no sign of following the sense of what he heard.

Max drew his attention and pointed to himself. "Harrow ! My name's—Harrow !"

The tramp repeated it, making it sound much closer to "A-yeh !" But it was at least an imitation. Max pointed to Faulkner and spoke his name.

"For-gher-ner !" the tramp said.

So far, so good. Max pointed at the tramp now, and waited. The idea didn't seem to register. Patiently, he went through the process from the beginning, and this time received an answer which sounded vaguely like "Smiffershon."

"Smithson ?" Max said slowly. The name had come into his mind by simple association of sounds ; he knew it wasn't what the tramp had said, and his previous articulations didn't indicate any major speech impediment, but the version the tramp had produced of the name "Faulkner" somehow pointed the way.

"Smiffershon," the tramp said.

"All right then—Smiffershon," Faulkner agreed, leaning forward on the chair he had pulled up beside the bed. "Uh—bed !" He pointed to the object as he named it.

There was no response at all. They tried all the other things in the vicinity—blankets, chairs, lockers, floor, ceiling and window—and Smiffershon simply stared at them without comprehension.

"So we'll just have to try and get at a few words of his own vocabulary," Max sighed.

They struggled for the better part of an hour. At the end of it, Max ran his fingers through his hair and turned away. "It's impossible !" he said angrily. "It's as though he just hasn't got names for the commonest things !"

"That's right." Faulkner rose to his feet. "What have we got—one word ?"

"That's all." Max glowered at the piece of paper in his hand. "A word sounding like 'ki-yun' which apparently means 'blanket.' There's not much doubt he's got the idea of what we're trying to do, is there ?"

Faulkner gave an emphatic head-shake.

"Then we're driven to the conclusion that he has no word for a bed, a chair, a table, a window, a pillow . . . But the Prof went over him, I went over him, *you* went over him, and there's no sign of any head injury that might cause aphasia.

The Prof said he was going to have his head X-rayed if he didn't start talking by the end of the week. So I guess that's all we can do—X-ray him for a tumour affecting the speech centres."

"Why hasn't it been done already?"

"I don't know," Max said dispiritedly. "It's about the *only* thing that hasn't been. In fact, I might as well set it up right now."

"Not right now," Faulkner said. He was checking his watch. "Have you any idea what the time is? Sarah's going to be furious with me when I get home!"

"Ohhhh—!" Max bit his lip. "Oh, very well. I suppose it's progress of some kind to have got him to talk at all."

"I just thought of something," Faulkner said, snapping his fingers. "A girl I used to know—studying philology and etymology. They said she was something of a genius. What *was* her name? Laura something—Laura Danville, that's it. I think she's doing post-graduate work at London University. She probably knows more languages than any two other people in the country, at least to recognise them. Shall I see if I can get hold of her?"

"Yes. Yes, please!" Max balled up the paper in his hand. "It's not much good going to an expert and saying, 'Here's a word meaning blanket we think which isn't quite pronounced like this—what language is it?' Try and get her to come and hear him for herself."

"Okay. I'll see if I can track her down this evening." Faulkner nodded and headed down the ward. The curious eyes of the other patients followed him. By now the tramp was a major topic of conversation, and there were probably a score of rumours current to explain the staff's special interest in him.

"Gordon!" Max called.

Faulkner paused for Max to catch him up.

"What is it?"

"If you do get hold of her, let me know, will you? I—I'm very anxious to get to the bottom of all this."

"So I see," Faulkner said dryly. "All right."

five

Max came into the hallway and stopped dead. Diana was sitting on a chair facing the door, her wristwatch in the palm of her hand, her legs crossed, her face set in an expressionless mask.

"You're late," she said neutrally.

"I know. I'm sorry. The tramp finally found his tongue, and Gordon and I have been trying to establish communication." Max brushed back his hair with his hand. "I feel exhausted. Could do with a drink. There's some of that Scotch left, isn't there?"

He pushed open the door of the lounge.

"I don't believe you."

"What?" He checked in mid-stride. That bright, false voice was so unlike Diana's for a moment he was tempted to look and see who else might have spoken.

"I said I don't believe you." She got to her feet, slipping her watch back on her wrist. "I don't see how you could possibly be as interested as you claim to be in a tramp who walked out of nowhere in the middle of the night. Not even if he has got a disease in which we have—uh—a personal interest. Is that clear?"

He stared at her.

"I'm tired of this tramp!" she said with sudden vehemence. "All this week you've talked about nothing else! The hell with him! The hell with hetero-whatever! I already know all I shall ever want to about that damned disease!"

She was absolutely white, and shaking from head to foot. Bewildered, he moved towards her, making to put his arms around her for comfort. But she stepped away, avoiding him.

"I suppose it doesn't matter to you," she said. "Making the only subject of conversation the one thing I'd give my right arm never to have to think of again. I don't think Jimmy mattered to you as your son. I think you regarded him just as an interesting case. If he'd been an animal instead of a human being you'd have pegged him out on a dissecting table and analysed him into little bits. He was a bit more than that to me. I'm sorry, but there it is."

"Honey!" Max's mind would not settle down; her words had made it spin like water in a cup. "You mustn't say things like that—you know it's not true! What I'm trying to do is

to make sure nobody else ever has to suffer the same as we had to."

"Oh, nobody could possibly be as—as obsessed as you are with something which really affected him." She drew a deep breath. "I didn't have time to say this to you this morning, but that was what got on my nerves. I've been working out all day what I was going to say to make up for it. I've spent the whole afternoon planning the dinner—wine, everything—so I could say it the proper way, the kind way. Well, if you want the dinner you can pick it out of the dustbin. It's spoiled completely because you didn't tell me you were going to be late. And you say it's because of your damned tramp again. So you've had what I was going to tell you, and you've had it straight, and I mean every last word!"

Sometimes you think you know someone, Max told himself, and all of a sudden it turns out that there's a total stranger with the same name and the same body.

She waited for his answer. When he could find nothing to say, she whirled and ran into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her. The noise broke the spell, and he dashed after her, caught her by the shoulder and spun her around to make her look at him.

"If it's come down to straight talking, then I think I'm entitled to do some too!" he snapped. "So the fuss is about a spoiled dinner, not about Jimmy or my behaviour or any of the other things you use as an excuse! Well, it's about time you got this through your head. How old is that tramp?"

She looked at him and didn't respond, not even with a headshake.

"Don't you realise?" Max plunged on. "He knew how to stay alive with the thing he's suffering from—or somebody did! And he's getting better on the fat-free diet we're giving him. If we'd known what he knows about heterochylia, Jimmy wouldn't be dead. Doesn't *that* matter?"

"No," she said, and there was a terrible ruthlessness in her flat tone. "He isn't Jimmy, is he?"

The memory of that scene was still bitterly, dreadfully alive in Max's memory next day. Eventually he had managed to calm Diana down, suggest that she take time off away from the house tomorrow, go to the West End and do some shopping—anything to distract her—and she had wanly consented. But when she left him at the hospital to drive on to town in the

morning there had still been traces of that total stranger showing through her familiar words and gestures.

The image of her haunted him all day. He was glad go be distracted by other duties ; apart from a routine check on Smiffershon and making the arrangements for an X-ray of his head, he tried to lose himself in ordinary tasks. And then Faulkner's friend turned up in the afternoon to see the tramp and talk to him.

He had had a vague mental impression of a serious-faced, probably plump, young woman, with heavy glasses and flat sensible shoes ; nothing else fitted his idea of a genius philologist who also happened to be female. On the contrary, Laura Danville was glamorous almost to the point of being absurd. Her dark hair was Mayfair-styled, her dress was from a model collection, her makeup was straight from *Vogue*, and her figure was either a biological miracle or the result of careful diet and exercise.

The first thing that lightened Max's grey day was the sight of Faulkner escorting her into the ward office with his tongue hanging out so far he was practically tripping over it. He had a bad case of old-flame disease, and even though it was pitiful it was essentially funny. Max's smile when he was introduced to Laura was not entirely forced.

"I told you about Laura !" Faulkner said enthusiastically, hardly able to tear his eyes away from her. "If this man—Smiffershon or whatever he calls himself—speaks any language on Earth, Laura can tell us what it it."

She smiled a mechanical acknowledgement of the compliment, took a chair for herself, and sat down.

"Gordon is a damned liar," she said. "According to what I could separate out from his incoherent splutterings, you have a man who speaks a language which isn't English or anything else you know of. I'm not sure exactly where I come in, but it's rather rare that one gets the chance of hearing a native speaker in Europe of some of the more distant languages, so I'm gambling this afternoon on the chance of hearing one I've not heard before."

She lifted an enormous handbag to the table beside her and opened it. From it she produced a miniature tape-recorder.

"Just give me some background before you take me to him," she requested.

Max did so, as far as he could. When he had recounted the whole story, Laura raised her pencilled eyebrows.

"No words for 'bed' or 'table'!" she said. "Doesn't that sound like a brain injury?"

Max nodded. "I had his head X-rayed this morning—the plates will be ready late this afternoon. But I doubt very much if they'll show anything."

"Ve-ery odd," she commented. "What racial group does he belong to? Can you tell?"

"European."

"Hm-m-m!" She gathered the tape-recorder and got up. "I look forward to seeing this mysterious Smiffershon."

This time, Max had screens around the tramp's bed. The staring eyes of the susceptible males in the ward got on his nerves. But there was nothing feminine about the brisk manner in which Laura proceeded to question Smiffershon, her recorder humming quietly on the bedside locker.

She began with the single words they had established the previous day, such as "ki-yun" for blanket and the curious pronunciation the man accorded to the name "Faulkner." By now Smiffershon seemed to be responding to the attention he was getting, and she elicited several long sentences from him. Once Faulkner tried to interrupt with a suggestion, and was given such a withering look he fell silent. Max watched and listened with fascination as Laura proceeded to copy, tone for tone, even the longest statements of Smiffershon's which she recorded.

At last he could bear it no longer. He said, "Are you getting anything?"

"It's an Indo-European language, that's certain," Laura said. A frown puckered her forehead. "Get me some paper."

"Here!" Faulkner produced a scribbling-pad, and she felt in her handbag for a pen. Craning their necks, they saw her transcribing words in the symbols of the international phonetic alphabet.

There was a lengthy pause, while the frown deepened. She chewed the end of the pen with sharp even teeth, then wrote a painstaking series of symbols in addition to the ones she had transcribed from Smiffershon.

At last she looked up and spoke directly to him. Neither Max nor Faulkner understood what she said, but Smiffershon's

eyes lit up and he jolted forward from the pillows of the bed. A rattled answer followed.

Which could mean only one thing. Laura had made herself understood.

"What did he say?" Max and Faulkner demanded as one.

"No—it can't possibly . . ." Laura spoke more to herself than to them. Her face was pale as she studied what she had written.

With sudden determination she began to coil the microphone flex back into its compartment in the recorder ; she snapped shut the lid and got up.

"Laura, you can't stop now just when you're getting somewhere !" Faulkner said.

"I can do exactly that, and I'm going to." Laura gave him a sidelong glance under automatically fluttered lashes. "And I'm not going to say more than that, either. I intend to play these recordings to someone who can make sense of them, and when I've done that I'll tell you what he says,"

"But you've made sense of them !" Max protested.

"That's precisely what I haven't done," Laura said forcefully, and strode down the ward with her heavily weighted bag swinging at her side.

Max had half expected Smiffershon to start from bed and go after her ; it must be important to him, surely, to have heard someone speak his own language after all this time. But he had relapsed against the pillows as though exhausted.

He exchanged a glance with Faulkner. Then, forgetting all the regulations and his own dignity, he dashed after Laura at top speed.

He caught up with her in the foyer and fell in beside her.

"Look, you have no right to do this !" he exclaimed. "This man is very sick, and we've been trying for a week to establish communication with him. You've got to let us know what you've found out !"

She set her chin determinedly and thrust through the exit door. He came after her, still arguing. By the time he had followed her to the roadway, she had realised she wasn't going to shake him off. Halting, she swung around to face him.

"Very well, I'll tell you," she said grimly.

Max wiped his face in relief. He said, "What language is he talking, then ?"

"English."

“What? Now look here—!”

“If you don’t believe me, why ask?” Her eyes, very bright in her pale face, fixed him piercingly.

“But he called a blanket ‘ki-yun’—that’s not English.” Max felt dazed; she didn’t seem to be joking, and yet . . .

“Skin,” Laura said. “By way of a drawled ‘ski-in’ and a mutation of the intrusive vowel. The laws of phonetic evolution for centum-group Indo-European languages are well established, and I used them to get through to him, working out the sounds you would expect to occur if English had undergone a series of changes about as extreme as those which it underwent between Langland’s day and the present. What is this, anyway?” she blazed up suddenly. “A hoax? It may be a very ingenious one, but I don’t like being made a fool of.”

“You mean he’s talking a—a sort of *descendant* of English?” Max glanced around at the passers-by on the pavement, wondering whether he was still in the ordinary world.

“You could put it like that. But a pretty peculiar sort of descendant. The idea’s completely ridiculous, anyway. Violent changes like this occur in conditions of poor communication between local groups, on a primitive level rather than an advanced one. The advent of sound recording, radio with its dialect-stifling effect—things like this mean that English won’t change ever again the way that’s implied by this fake language the man in there is talking. It made me pretty damned angry, I can tell you, when I realised.”

A cruising taxi came in sight; she darted to the roadside to hail it and left Max standing in total bewilderment, feeling as though the world had started to turn the wrong way on its axis.

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He was so completely lost in his thoughts that when a car which had been pulled up on the other side of the road waiting for the traffic to clear came over and stopped alongside him he did not at first notice.

A voice bitter-sweet with irony cut into his preoccupation.

“So *that’s* your tramp!” Diana said.

“What? What?” He snapped back to the present. “Oh, hullo, honey. I’m sorry, I was thinking.”

“She could make anyone think. Especially me.”

Now he looked more closely at her. Her face was a mask of fury set in the frame of the driver's window of the car, and her hands were white-knuckled on the steering-wheel. He could not for a moment think what to say, and she plunged on.

"Just as well I arrived when I did, wasn't it? Otherwise I suppose you'd have come home late again tonight and said it was due to the tramp and I wouldn't have known what sort of tramp you were talking about."

"What on earth do you mean?" Max said slowly.

"You know—don't try and pretend!" If she had been standing, Diana would have stamped her foot. "She ran pretty fast when she saw I'd turned up, didn't she?"

"Don't shout at me!" Max said, realising that people walking past were staring at them. "Do you mean the girl I was talking to, who got in the taxi a few moments ago? She's a philologist from London University that Gordon Faulkner got along to see if she could understand what Smiffershon was saying."

"Very ingenious!" Diana said in a tone of parodied admiration.

"Look, I've had enough of this," Max said, and took a deep breath. "I'm going to take you in and make you ask Gordon for yourself. Come on."

"Oh, I'm sure he's got his story all ready," Diana agreed. "After all, it's bad form to tell tales on your colleagues. I don't want to see your precious Gordon, or your girl-friend, or you ever again!"

She swivelled in the seat to snatch at the ignition key and start the car.

Exactly how it happened was never quite clear to Max. It was over so quickly that he had had no time to absorb the succession of events; it simply seemed that his awareness was dazzled by a terrible non-physical light, due first to blind rage, then to pain.

He had meant to open the car door and stop Diana driving away. He had stretched at the handle, but his palm was slippery with sweat, and when she shot her arm out and pulled the door shut again by the bottom of the empty window-frame he lost his grip, and it slammed.

But by that time he had started to place his other hand, his left one, on the door-pillar, and the door chopped like a guillotine.

By some miracle of self-control he did not cry out—it had happened so fast he was left behind. Reflex made him jerk the door open to free himself ; something fell from between the door and the pillar and dropped through the bars of a drain-grating in the gutter below. As though at a great distance he heard Diana shrieking with horror at what she had done.

It wasn't the pain, the shock, or the welling stream of blood that poured back over his hand like a red glove, flowing into his sleeve, which made him faint. It was seeing that hand and realising what in fact had happened to it.

Axe-clean, the edge of the door had taken off the top of his left middle finger by slicing between the bones at the knuckle.

The top of the left middle finger.

The image of the bloody flesh swelled, ballooning out until it merged with the redness edging his field of vision. He heard cries and running footsteps. The red turned to black.

He recovered consciousness in the casualty room of the hospital. He was lying on a padded bench ; across his belly had been laid a red blanket on that a piece of white linen, spotted with blood. Gordon Faulkner, looking so pale he might have suffered the injury himself, was completing the work of dressing the finger with a simple bandage.

"How—how is it?" Max said, licking his lips. The pain was like frozen lightning ; he could feel it forking all the way along the nerves from the finger to the brain. Faulkner gave a start, and the nurse who was assisting him put down her tray of dressings and hurried around the end of the bench to ease Max's head back on the cushion.

"Lie still!" Faulkner commanded. "I haven't quite done."

Obediently, Max stared at the ceiling directly overhead. His mind swam, clear and bright, in the middle of the fog of agony. He said, "It took the top off the finger, didn't it?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it did." Faulkner tied off the end of the bandage and pushed back the chair he was sitting on. "But it probably won't give you much trouble—it's clean as a cut with a scalpel. Bruised, of course. But not too badly."

"Did you look for the—the bit?" Max said.

"Of course I did." Faulkner moved to the corner sink and began to wash his hands. "I'm sorry, Max—we couldn't find it. I think it fell down a drain. If it hadn't, I'd have stitched it straight back on, and it would have healed."

"So that was it, was it?" Max closed his eyes, moving his left arm tentatively across his body.

"What did you say?" Faulkner took a towel and rubbed his hands vigorously.

It had come to Max's mind to say, "I thought it must have been something like that." But on reflection he couldn't see that the remark was particularly sensible. He changed his mind.

"I saw something fall down. I remember now."

"Ghastly thing to have happened," Faulkner muttered. "I can't say how sorry I am, Max."

"What for?" Max tried opening his eyes again, and found his vision quite steady. His heartbeats were loud in his ears. "Uh—where's Diana?"

"Waiting in the next room. There's a nurse with her." Faulkner hesitated, then went on in a lower tone, "She's dreadfully upset, Max. I'm sure she didn't mean anything like this to happen, you know."

"Didn't she?" Max whispered. "I wonder. You asked her what the row was about, I suppose?"

"No, of course not." Faulkner looked uncomfortable. "It wasn't any of my business."

"She saw me talking to your friend Laura out front and leapt to some very unpleasant conclusions."

Faulkner didn't comment; he just stared down blankly.

A knock came at one of the doors, and the nurse went to see who it was. Max rolled his head sideways, catching a glimpse in the opening of one of the X-ray technicians. He was carrying some large plates. The nurse conferred with him for a few seconds, then turned and beckoned Faulkner.

"Are those the Smiffershon pictures?" Max demanded.

"Shut up, Max," Faulkner said over his shoulder. "You're going to lie there and relax for the next half-hour."

"I said: are those the Smiffershon pictures?" Max repeated. He threw aside the blanket covering him and swung his feet to the floor. "I've been waiting all bloody day for them!"

"Yes, I'm sorry, Dr. Harrow," the technician said, craning his head. "We had to do Mr. FitzPrior's pictures first."

"Did you? Be damned to Mister bloody FitzPrior!" Max stood up; he felt slightly light-headed, but otherwise intact. A glare prevented the worried nurse from laying hands on him.

"Max—" Faulkner began.

"I want to see them. I'll lie down afterwards if you like." Max wiped his face with his good hand. "Come on!"

Faulkner gave a sigh of exasperation. "I'm damned glad I'm not faced with you as a patient every day!" he snapped. "All right, Thomas—get it over with. I'd have thought this could wait after what happened to Dr. Harrow."

"That's exactly it, sir." The technician looked almost embarrassed. "I don't believe they can wait. Here they are."

He handed the first plate over to Faulkner, who held it up to a convenient window. Max stared past him, frowning.

There was a curious blurred overlay on the familiar skull-silhouette.

"It's fogged!" he said angrily.

"Yes, sir." Thomas handed over the next one. "So's this. All of them are. I thought it might be an equipment fault, and I've been checking up. But the equipment's working perfectly—Mr. FitzPrior's pictures came out very clear."

"So what accounts for this?" Faulkner demanded.

"I can only think of one thing," Thomas answered. "We had some trouble getting him to keep still on the table, you see, so his head was in contact with the plates for some time. Uh—the fogging must have happened then. He wasn't given any isotopes they didn't tell us about, was he?"

Max felt a terrible sinking sensation. He looked at Faulkner, and had to take hold of the door-jamb to steady himself.

"No," Faulkner said slowly. "No, he hasn't had any isotopes. But do you mean you think he's radioactive?"

"That's the only explanation I can think of," Thomas nodded.

"But he doesn't exhibit any signs of radiation sickness," Max burst out. "And to fog X-ray plates like this, why—he'd be half-dead!"

"Well, it's not that bad, sir," Thomas countered. "I mean, he must have had his head in contact with the first plate I showed you for anything up to five minutes while we tried to get him to keep still. And it hasn't completely fogged it, just blurred the image. The later ones were taken much quicker, and they're fairly clear. But there's this smudge in the brain, and the bright spot"—he pointed to the plate Faulkner was holding—"that's the thyroid, and it's shown up on all the pictures."

"Have we got a Geiger counter handy?" Faulkner rapped, thrusting the plates back into Thomas's hands.

"Yes, sir. We've got two."

"Get them. No, wait a moment. I don't want to start a panic. Get up to Ward B and tell the sister we're going to move Smiffershon into isolation."

"There isn't a single room available," Max said.

"We'll throw what's-his-name—FitzPrior out if we have to." Faulkner was sweating. "Max, get back in there and lie down, for God's sake. In your state you'll be nothing but a damned nuisance. Lord, this is terrible!"

When Max didn't move, he rounded on him. "Get in there!" he barked. "Don't you realise this is an emergency? You're going to do what I tell you or—"

Max turned and walked back to the couch. Reason informed him Faulkner was perfectly right. But the shock of what Thomas had discovered, coming on top of the other, had dizzied him. How was he going to rest, thinking of so much all at once?

"Max!" That was Faulkner on the point of departing with Thomas. "Lie there for half an hour. Get Diana to take you home if she will. If not, get a taxi. And don't come in tomorrow, for pity's sake. You can't just shrug off what's happened to your hand."

"But haven't I a right to know about Smiffershon?" Max heard the note of petulance in his voice.

"To *hell* with Smiffershon!" Faulkner said with passion. "We have nine hundred people in this hospital, and I'm more worried about nine hundred than one dirty tramp!"

The door slammed, leaving Max and the nurse alone. She made to help him lie down, but he managed it himself; then she spread the blanket solicitously over him.

"Dr. Faulkner's quite right, you know, Dr. Harrow," she said.

"Oh, I know, I know." Max clenched his right fist under the blanket. "Leave me alone, will you?"

"Shall I let your wife come in and sit with you, or would you rather she waited till you're ready to go?"

"I don't mind," Max said wearily. He felt enmeshed by a web of circumstances. Coincidences had sprung up around him like snares. He was too confused to sort them out, but he felt they formed a pattern now—the last clue had been given.

The nurse moved to the door on the other side of the room and opened it. After a moment Diana came in, her cheeks wet with tears and her eyes swollen. At first when she tried to speak she choked on the words. Eventually she mastered herself.

“Max, I didn’t mean to do it !” she moaned.

He muttered some consoling answer and asked to be allowed to lie quiet. The nurse brought a chair and set it beside the couch for her. For a long time there was only the hum of the hospital at work around them.

At last, just before the half-hour was up and Max was due to leave, Thomas came in with a Geiger counter, much to Diana’s dismay, and carefully checked Max’s hands and clothes for any trace of radioactivity. When she asked why, he answered curtly that it was a routine measure and left it at that.

seven

Dry-eyed now, but with her lower lip trembling in self-detestation, Diana drove him home. She hardly said a word, but made him comfortable on the couch in the lounge and went to make hot sweet tea.

The moment she was out of the room, Max got off the couch. He had no idea what her reaction might have been to what he intended to do, but he didn’t want to have to try and contrive a rational explanation for what seemed even to him a crazy act.

The finger-bone which had been found on Smiffershon when he was laid on this very same couch had been in his jacket for the next couple of days ; he had shown it to Faulkner at the hospital, then carried it about with him, and eventually had tossed it into one of the drawers of his bureau. It was simply a dry, greyish-white bone ; it offered no clue to Smiffershon’s identity.

He found it quickly enough, took it from the drawer, and stood looking down at it resting in his palm. The sight brought to mind with horrible vividness an image from his recurrent nightmare : just so did the kneeling man in the dream look down at . . .

The same bone ?

Madness ! Max closed his fingers over the little relic and went back to the couch. He lay against the heaped cushions, feeling claws of sweat scratch at his body. The same sensation he had felt a short time before in the hospital overtook him, more strongly than before—the sense of being at the mercy of a hostile fate, which was weaving a remorseless net about him.

He stared at the bone. Reluctantly, his fingers moving against his will, he fumbled it up in his injured hand, managing not to press on or rub the raw flesh, and laid it against the tip of his right middle finger. Strip away the flesh, and the two bones—one dead, one alive—would be effective mirror-images. A pair.

Why had such a terrible string of coincidences knotted around him ? He knew that was all they could be—coincidences, accidents. But he could not make himself believe in his heart. Gibbering, superstition shook itself in a dark corner of his brain.

Then Diana was opening the door, and he plunged the bone out of sight into a pocket and greeted her with a forced, guilty-looking smile.

He had not spent such a miserable evening since the day of Jimmy's death. Diana moved through the house on tip-toe, breathing the atmosphere of a morgue, while he lay and stared at nothing, his brain a chaos haunted by terror. Vainly he tried to tell himself that he had let himself be manoeuvred into a susceptible condition by the original coincidence of Smiffershon's arrival here, at his house ; thereafter he had manufactured a succession of illogical associations, clear to the point at which his subconscious arranged for the chopping-off of his finger-tip.

He didn't convince himself.

When he went to bed—early, because lying on the couch and trying to rest had proved more exhausting than a day's work—he was visited again by the same dream. It was clearer than it had ever been before, to the point where he felt he was *in* the squalid timber-roofed house, choking on the coarse smoke and shivering because the stuffiness did not counteract the icy winter outside.

All went as usual. There was the kneeling man, head bowed over the little bone cupped in his hands, while the onlookers waited anxiously . . . for what ? Success in some endeavour that Max could not understand. He was dually aware—he

knew, at the same time as he was present in the stinking chilly house, that he was lying on his side in the bed, his right hand thrust up under the pillow and clasped around the bone again. What had prompted him to put it there, he didn't know ; when he considered the question, he felt frightened.

And at last the moment came when there was a shift in his point of view within the dream, when he seemed to be looking up direct from the palms of the kneeling man into his face.

That was when he screamed aloud and woke up.

"Max ! Max !" Diana was moaning over him, trying to wake him. "What's wrong, for God's sake ? Why are you crying out like that ?"

The need for a lie was instantly clear, through a fog of pain and fear. Max swallowed from a mouth dry with motiveless panic.

"Uh—I hurt myself," he said. "I think I turned over on my hand. I'm sorry. I'll try and sleep on my back and keep it out of the way."

"Ohhhh, *Max* !" Diana leaned forward against him, her hair brushing his cheek. "I must have been out of my mind to do a terrible thing like that, and it was all because I was in a bad temper . . . You know I had a dreadful morning in town, and I think I wanted to take it out on somebody, and then—then I have to do this !"

He put his uninjured hand comfortingly behind her head and stroked her hair.

"It was an accident, honey. You don't have to blame yourself."

"But I do, I do !" She buried her face on his shoulder, and began to cry.

Trying to calm her, he stared over her head at the wall of the room.

Yes, it was just as well he had invented a prevaricating lie to account for his screaming. How could he tell her the true reason—that for the first time in all the many nights he had had the dream he had recognised the face of the kneeling man ?

The face was Smiffershon's.

Little by little, a plan for the following day began to piece together in his mind. He was going to set these absurd notions at rest once for all.

And if he didn't succeed ?

He shuddered. He didn't like to think about that possibility.

In the morning he suffered Diana to bring him breakfast in bed ; he picked at the food without appetite. But he refused to listen when she pleaded with him to stay there all day. He got up and dressed, and went downstairs to the phone in the hall.

His finger had stiffened to the point where he could not flex it, and it was hard to hold the receiver in his left hand. But the original brilliant pain had subsided to a throbbing ache ; later, he could replace the dressing himself. He compelled himself to ignore the ache and addressed his attention to the phone.

The first call he made was to the hospital. He asked for Dr. Faulkner, and the switchboard girl hesitated. She said at last, "Is that Dr. Harrow?"

"Yes, it is."

"I have a message for you from Professor Lensch, doctor. Just a moment." Paper rustled. "Uh—here it is. I'll read what he actually wrote down. 'Max, you can damned well stay at home till you're over the shock of losing that finger. I've told the staff not to let you in and not to pass your calls to Faulkner or anybody else. I'll be coming in tomorrow to do the anaesthetic for FitzPrior's leg, and you can present yourself for inspection then if you feel up to it. I'm very sorry to hear what happened.'"

The girl folded the paper again ; he could hear it in the phone. "So are we all, by the way, doctor," she added. "Terribly sorry."

Max gave an exasperated grunt. "It's not serious," he said. "Anyone would think I'd been half-killed. What's happened about Smiffershon and his radioactivity? That's what I want to know."

"I'm sorry, doctor. I've been ordered not to say anything."

Diana passed through the hallway, carrying his breakfast tray to the kitchen, and looked at him in passing. Her eyes were wide and sad.

"Hell !" he said, and dropped the phone with a clatter. Almost at once it rang, and he snatched it up again.

"Harrow speaking !"

"Oh—this is Laura Danville here," the familiar voice said. "I tried to get you at the hospital and they said you were at home today."

"Who is it?" Diana called from the kitchen, pausing in the act of splashing water over the dishes.

Max could not resist the temptation that assailed him. Instead of answering, he raised his voice and went on into the phone, "Be careful what you say. My wife thinks you're my mistress."

He distinctly heard the sharp intake of breath Diana gave. "She what?" Laura said. "Then I hope to God she's listening right now. Tell her from me that the mere sight of a man and a bed at the same time isn't enough to make me into anyone's mistress. Especially not when somebody seems to be trying to make a fool of me."

"I'm doing nothing of the kind," Max snapped.

"Oh, not you, not you. This Smiffershon character. You know I said I was going to play those tapes I made yesterday to someone who could pass more authoritative judgment?"

"Yes!" Max felt his heart pound suddenly; he fumbled with his right hand for cigarettes and shook one out of the packet on to the phone table.

"Well, I went round and saw Dr. Easler last night—you may know the name because he's written popular books on language. He's an internationally accepted expert on the whole field."

"What did he say?"

"That the most likely explanation for your mysterious tramp is that he's a philologist or something of the kind who's gone off his head. I was pretty well exactly right in my snap judgment. What's on the tapes is consistent with the result of applying known laws of phonal evolution to modern English, in the context of a totally non-industrialised society. Mark you, to be sure of this I'd need to bring Easler face to face with your Smiffershon, but it's the only obvious explanation."

"You mean—" Max drew thoughtfully on his cigarette. "You mean he's an expert on language; he's become unhinged, presumably while working on some theoretical study of the future evolution of English, and as a result he refuses to talk the English which he knows perfectly well, and will only communicate in his hypothetical English-derivative."

"That's the general idea."

Diana had come from the kitchen and was standing in the hall, looking at him without emotion. He glanced at her and took another drag of his cigarette.

"I see. But someone as brilliant as that, surely, wouldn't just be able to vanish without trace. Have any famous philologists disappeared lately?"

"I asked Easler, and he couldn't think of anybody."

"He couldn't go down and see Smiffershon, could he?"

"No, he's off to Rome tomorrow for a congress and he won't be back for at least a fortnight."

"Damn. Well, thank you very much for letting me know."

"That's all right." She gave a pleasant chuckle. "And I'm sorry I snapped at you. It's really very interesting. I'd rather like to find out how elaborate Smiffershon's pseudo-language is—although to judge from the gaps in the vocabulary, he didn't get very far with it before his breakdown."

"Oh, just before you ring off!" Max said, an idea striking him. "Do you know any archeologists?"

"A few. Why?"

Max stubbed his cigarette and absently put his hand in his pocket. There was the bone, retrieved from beneath his pillow. He fingered it as he continued.

"I want someone to do a radio-carbon dating job for me."

"Hmmm! You realise this isn't just a matter of putting an object in a machine and reading a dial, don't you?"

"I think so."

"Well, then—now who could arrange it?" Laura pondered.

"Oh, I know. Go and see Dr. Gerry Anderson at Victoria College. I've met him a few times, and he's very nice. He spends a lot of his time digging in Scandinavian peat-bogs, but I think he's in London at the moment."

"Thanks very much," Max said, and rang off.

He found Diana still looking fixedly at him, and was suddenly irritated.

"That was my alleged girl-friend!" he said. "Satisfied?"

"I deserved that," Diana said quietly. "I was going to ask if you'll be all right while I do my shopping, that's all."

"I'll be fine," Max said, turning to take down a coat from the wall-rack—it was colder than yesterday. "I'm going to see someone at Victoria College. I doubt if I'll be back until late this afternoon."

"Max, are you sure—?"

"Sure I'm up to it? Hell, yes. It wasn't my leg that was chopped off, was it?"

He shrugged into the coat, awkwardly for his hurt hand, and relented enough to kiss her cheek before opening the door. She didn't respond; when the door closed behind him, she was still just standing there.

e i g h t

"You realise it's not just a matter of pushing a button and reading a dial?" Anderson said, and gave a wry smile. Max wondered if he had used the phrase to Laura some time; it would account for her saying almost exactly the same.

Anderson was a fresh-faced man, with crisp fair hair and big blue eyes. He was probably in his mid-thirties, and looked younger. Max had immediately taken to him.

"I know it's a delicate job," he said, feeling in his pocket for the bone. "Also it's probably expensive. But I'll pay whatever's necessary. This is the thing I want dated."

He handed the bone over. Anderson studied it.

"Human?" he said eventually. Max nodded. "Where's it from?"

"It was found in the possession of a patient of mine, and we haven't any other clue to his identity," Max explained. It occurred to him when he had spoken that that wasn't wholly true, and he made a mental note to get hold of the knife as well.

"I see. Another thing I ought to warn you of is that it's very difficult to date something either very recent or very ancient. But I imagine you have some special reason for thinking this may not be just any odd bone?" Anderson cocked his head.

"The man may possibly be a philologist," Max said. "In which case, it's conceivable this is an archeological relic which he's picked up. I can't see any reason why he should have it otherwise."

He was appalled at the glibness of his fabrications.

"Fair enough," Anderson nodded, rising. "Well, I can tell you right away whether it's worth making the attempt, anyhow. You probably know that C-14 from nuclear tests is fouling up the radio-carbon method, which depends on measuring the rate of decay of natural C-14. Fallout contaminates things sometimes and gives a spuriously recent reading. Hang on while I check the count from this—I may be able to say right off that it isn't worth trying."

He went through an inner door and closed it behind him. Max heard voices, indistinct and random-sounding. He leaned back and looked about him, wishing his hand would stop hurting.

The room was small but pleasant, its light walls shelved with books and archeological souvenirs. On a table in the corner

was a stack of pre-prints from a scientific journal, which Anderson was apparently sorting into envelopes for mailing.

What was he doing here, anyway? The facile story he had told Anderson didn't rationalise the action to himself. He was probably on an idiotic false trail. After all, he could hardly have explained what he thought that trail might be.

The door opened and Anderson came back, his face grave.

"Have you been carrying that bone about with you?" he demanded.

"Only this morning. Why?"

"Because it's hot!" Anderson plumped himself into his chair. "It's absolutely impossible to get any kind of dating for it—I don't know where it's been, but it's giving a count so high it must have been in a—a nuclear testing zone, or something!" He wiped his face. "I don't know if it's high enough to harm anyone, but I'd watch myself if I were you. Oh, of course, you're a doctor, aren't you? So you know about risks of that sort."

Max gave a thoughtful nod. "I see. What have you done with it?"

"Well, I've left it there in a lead-foil envelope. If you want it back, you'd better have the envelope as well, but I think it would be safer for everyone if you allowed me to have it buried good and deep."

"I would like it back," Max said. "It may be rather important."

"Your funeral," Anderson shrugged, and leaned back to call through the door of the adjacent room.

When he had left Anderson, he walked at random along the street, thinking deeply. He wasn't surprised at the radio-activity of the bone—it was predictable that if Smiffershon himself was contaminated, the bone would be also. But he was disappointed at Anderson's flat dismissal of any chance that it might be dated; he should have known that was the most probable outcome, and he had ignored it.

Disappointed? He caught himself making the assumption, and out of honesty added a rider: *yes, but also relieved.*

Because, whatever the nature of the realisation he was groping towards, he was sure of one thing.

It terrified him.

He needed to order his muddled, half-formulated thinking. Finding himself on the point of passing a cafe, he turned and

went in to order a cup of coffee. He let it grow cold in front of him as he attempted to list on a paper napkin all the factors that blended in the barely-glimpsed pattern he felt was weaving.

A tramp comes out of the night. He has heterochyilia. He is seen by the one doctor in a thousand who can diagnose his complaint and make sure his life is saved.

In dreams, a man's finger-bone has been seen—before the advent of the tramp. The tramp has a finger-bone with him.

A corresponding bone is chopped from the hand of the man who dreamed the dreams.

Heterochyilia is a disease attributed to radiation damage of the developing foetus. When this man was in the womb, background radiation was at its natural level—there was no fallout in the nineteen-twenties.

Eating fat is suicide to a sufferer from heterochyilia. Someone must have known this ; knowing it, has enabled the man to survive to an astonishingly unlikely age.

He is contaminated with radioactivity. After a week of hospital hygiene, he fogs X-ray plates. This is not just a case of a man being dusted with radioactive particles; they are inside him, in bone, muscle and gland. The thyroid showed bright white on the X-ray plates—radio-iodine. The brain glowed—radio-phosphorous, perhaps. The bone glowed—radio-strontium.

But he lives, and talks. And what he says is in a language which experts declare might be descended from English after many generations “ in the context of a totally non-industrialised society.”

The face of the tramp is the face of the man in the dream who holds the little bone.

He hesitated before adding the last item to the list—it could so easily be the result of normal subconscious image-blending. But he felt obscurely driven to include it as significant.

Then he sat back and stared at what he had written, and was as helpless as before. He wished he could confide in someone: Diana, for choice. But she had been so erratic and disturbed since Jimmy's death that he would not dare to try and make her understand how he felt.

Gordon Faulkner? The Prof? No, you couldn't make level-headed scientifically trained men like those two accept your wild guesswork. And, after all, what did it analyse down to? No more than a notion that the tramp was odd, that the way he was odd was vitally important.

No single thing he had noted down was intrinsically meaningful. In combination, they spoke aloud to Max himself. For anyone else, though, they would probably be a random grouping.

Laura had said something about Smiffershon being a philologist out of his mind. In that case, would his real name be Smithson? Max recalled his inspired guess. He couldn't remember whether he had told Laura about it or not. If he had had his wits about him he would have asked her on the phone this morning; since he hadn't done so, and had no idea how to contact her except through Faulkner—who wouldn't be willing to talk to him today—he could only speculate.

In exasperation he pushed his notes aside and drew his cup of coffee towards him. It had gone quite cold, and a skin had formed on top. He was mechanically preparing to lift it off with the back of the spoon, when a thought struck him.

Skin. That was how Laura had derived Smiffershon's word for a blanket, *ki-yun*. He could see how the word might have changed, all right. But he couldn't see how the world could change to the point at which someone's only term for a covering would be a sound meaning animal-hide.

God! How far in the past was that epoch of human technical development, for practically everyone on Earth? How far in the past was a day when woven fabrics were unknown?

Or . . .

He was still holding the spoon, a fraction of an inch away from the side of the cup. As the horror dawned on him, he heard the spoon begin to rattle tinnily in time with the trembling of his hand.

Or how near in the future?

He never remembered afterwards where he wandered to, blind and dizzy with appalling terror, all his attention fixed on the vista of destruction ahead. In imagination he was seeing Smiffershon's world. Not this tidy green island sown with prosperous, crowded cities, its people well-fed, warmly housed, smartly clothed.

But an island turned to one great blasted heath, where the greenery sickened on the branch and animals brought forth mis-shapen young.

Oh, it fitted! Everything fitted!

The bombs would not only smash the cities. In the dry days of summer they would light hundred-mile fires, to burn farm

and field and forest until the rains of autumn and leave behind next year's dustbowl. The sheep for wool, the flax for linen, the factories for nylon and the ships for cotton : gone. So Smiffershon had no word for a woven cloth. He got his garments the ancient way, by stripping a beast naked.

No wonder his face was scarred ; no wonder he was capable of killing a mere Alsatian dog—he must have faced animals far more savage !

Smiffershon must be a long way from the disaster itself—otherwise he would know rags, at least. And the fact that he didn't pointed to further conclusions.

Humanity must be fighting a losing battle. All hope of rebuilding had been sapped away ; now the ambition was no higher than simply to stay alive.

But how ? If they had no sheep for wool, this didn't necessarily imply they had no farms ; it did, though, say that the ground was poor, the yield meagre. Poisoned. Saturated by the curse on the third and fourth generation, as Smiffershon's body was saturated. As lines of inheritance met and blended, the recessive mutations were appearing—in wheat and oats, in cattle and pigs, and inevitably in man. The fact that Smiffershon was alive meant that the memory of how to hold heterochyilia at bay had endured when knowledge of weaving was lost. The disease must be commonplace for that to happen.

An ocean of terror was drowning Max Harrow now.

When they had forgotten everything else, these people would remember that the curse had been brought upon them by their forebears, who had thrown away a comfortable, prosperous world and condemned their grandchildren to a living hell. Was it that hate which had fanned their last flicker of will to a roaring blaze capable of burning down the wall of time itself ? He thought it must be. He could conceive no other explanation which fitted.

So, then, certain among them sought ways to tell the past what it had done—and found them. Maybe some genetic accident conferred the skill ; maybe it had always been within the potentiality of human beings, and had never previously been activated by so powerful a motive.

He visualised individuals (what would you call them—shamans, medicine-men ?) focussing hatred like an electric arc on relics of the happier past : human relics, tools, weapons and bones. Like his own finger-bone. That was what it must be,

this little scrap of another world which, given flesh, would complete his maimed hand. The bone *was* his, come back to him.

Some psychic factor—he realised the inadequacy of the terms he was inventing, and didn't care, having no time for niceties—which might possibly be the recent memory of Jimmy's death from the same disease sapping his vitality, rived open the barrier separating Smiffershon from the object of his hate. How thick a barrier—ten generations, twenty? It made no difference.

Max struggled to visualise how it must have been for him to be pitched naked into an alien universe, where cities stood and millions of people went about incomprehensible activities, where no one could understand him, where his only link with familiar things consisted in the bone he desperately clutched. That same thread of non-physical causality which had united Max's mind in dreaming with the environment of the future hell-on-earth would have drawn Smiffershon blindly towards the owner of the bone, equipping himself on the way with a discarded coat and boots from a rubbish pile and a knife with a broken tip. What would he have done, but for the chance of taking food that poisoned him? Killed?

In the caverns of his skull Max cried silently that that would have been better. He would rather be dead than facing in full awareness the horror of the truth that had come to him.

n i n e

“Prof! Prof!”

In the airy corridor Lensch paused and glanced back. On seeing the haggard figure running towards him, pursued by an anxious male nurse and accompanied by the startled looks of a dozen staff and out-patients, he felt his jaw drop.

“Max—good God!” he exclaimed. “What have you been doing to yourself? You look terrible!”

“Prof, I've got to speak to you.” Eyes alight with an awful inhuman brilliance, Max clutched at the professor's arm. The bandage on his left hand was dirty and the ends had come untied and been crudely re-knotted; his cheeks were stubbly and a smear of grime crossed his forehead; his clothes were crumpled and his shoes dusty.

"Why, of course, Max," Lensch agreed solicitously. He gave a curt jerk of his head at the male nurse who was hovering behind Max now, signalling him to go away, and the man obeyed with obvious reluctance.

"Come into my office with me," Lensch said, taking Max's arm. "Sit down. You're overwrought—and what *have* you been doing to yourself, anyway?"

He closed the door and moved to his desk. Max slumped into a chair facing him, like a badly stuffed doll.

"I've been wandering about all night," he said, and made a vague gesture of dismissal. "That doesn't matter. Thank God I've got in to see you at last—I had to kick up a hell of a row in the foyer before the stupid fools would let me inside at all."

Worried, Lensch folded his hands, set his elbows on the desk and leaned forward. "What you need, Max—" he began.

"What I need is for someone to listen to me," Max cut in. "Nothing else—is that clear?"

"I—"

"Shut up and listen to me, for God's sake!" Max blazed. "If I can't talk to someone I'll go crazy, I know it."

"Very well," Lensch agreed after a pause. "Let me warn you first that I haven't got much time—only about ten minutes before I have to go and do the anaesthetic for FitzPrior's amputation—and second that I'm going to make a condition. If I listen to you, you must in turn promise that when you've spoken your mind you'll do what I tell you, which will include having your hand dressed again, taking a sedative, and going straight home and to bed for at least twenty-four hours. Do you understand me? If you won't promise that, I'll have you put to bed here."

The boom of authority in his tone pierced Max's wild mood. He gave a sullen nod of acceptance, and Lensch looked satisfied.

"Now what is it you want so much to tell me, Max?"

Max licked his lips. After the walking nightmare in which he had spent the seemingly endless hours of darkness, to be back in the familiar atmosphere of the hospital had come as a shock. He felt the urgency and certainty of his conviction slipping away, and whereas even a few minutes ago he had been sure of his ability to persuade anybody he had an important message to convey, now the calm-faced Lensch opposite him looked like a monster of doubt and scepticism.

He said at last, "I know who Smiffershon is. I know where he comes from and why he's here."

"And this information has reduced you to such a state?" Lensch said, giving a faint smile. "It must be very alarming. Go on," he added encouragingly.

With an access of bitterness, Max did so. Lensch's expression of patient interest, his professional mask, slipped by swift degrees as he listened, and he revealed shocked dismay. Watching him, seeing how he was failing to make any impact, Max grew desperate; of course it was incredible to think that a man alive here and now was a refugee from a future where all Earth was polluted with radioactivity—but what other explanation fitted the facts?

He brought his recital to a halt. He hadn't said everything he had meant to, but what was the use of going on? Numbly he awaited Lensch's reaction.

At length the professor stirred in his chair. Looking down at his hands resting on the desk-top, he said, "Max, you have constructed a very ingenious hypothesis. But I'm afraid that's all. You should have told me, or someone, about these evil dreams you began to have after the death of your son. If you'd done so, you would have spared yourself this huge elaboration of them into . . . what can one call it? A personal myth, perhaps."

"I see," Max said, looking at the floor in front of his feet placed tidily side by side. "You think this is a—"

"Max!" Lensch cut in sharply. "I would not speak so frankly to you but for the fact that I detected doubt in your own voice while you were talking to me. Isn't that true? You aren't looking for someone to listen to you, but for someone who will confirm your ideas and say, 'Yes, this is so, it must be as you say.' And the reason is because there's a gap in your hypothesis. You're unable to explain how Smiffershon could come from—from the future, and be here now, except by inventing empty double-talk phrases."

Max felt himself colouring.

"I see it's true, and that you know it," Lensch said. "I imagined you would be too sensible wholly to accept your inventions, and I'm delighted at being proved right."

A phone on his desk buzzed; he touched a switch and said "Lensch. Yes?"

"Mr. Kidwelly is here, Professor, and would like you to go with him and see Mr. FitzPrior before the operation."

"Tell him I will join him in just a couple of minutes," Lensch said, and clicked the switch off.

"I must say this, Max, before I have to go. Nobody denies that this Smiffershon is a very extraordinary phenomenon—his strange words, his remarkable tolerance of the radioactivity with which his body is contaminated, and so on. You have been driven by a succession of shocks to imagine a nice tidy framework of explanation, and no one can blame you for wanting to do so.

"The trouble is that life isn't nice and tidy. You can't just invoke imaginary physical laws to plug the gaps in a problem. We shall find out, little by little, the truth about Smiffershon. Gordon's friend Miss Danville, for example, has promised to return and attempt to converse with him in a day or two. We are going to organise psychological tests for him. And so on. Oh, don't doubt that we are very interested and eager to know more about him, because of his heterochylia if for no other reason.

"But—please, Max, think about what I've said. And do now as you promised you would: get a sedative, have your hand dressed again, go home and go to bed."

Abruptly Lensch's calm reasonableness was infinitely enraging. Max jumped to his feet and strode forward.

"While *you*!" he said viciously. "While you prostitute your skill to one of the bastards who want to condemn my children to be born diseased and crippled and blind and mad, who want to burn the cities and let the world go smash for their own selfish stupid idiotic pride!"

On the last phrase he leaned over the desk so that his face was almost touching Lensch's, and the words poured out so violently that a spray of saliva came from his lips and dotted the lenses of the professor's spectacles.

There was a moment of silence. At the end of it, suddenly horrified at his own loss of control, Max drew back, shaking from head to foot. Lensch didn't raise his hand to his glasses.

"I was told by Gordon about your former outburst, Max," he said. "What you have said to me is unforgivable. But I will try and be charitable, and assume that you are still affected by your boy's death and the possible reason for his affliction. I will call a nurse to take you to see Gordon. I think you

would rather that not too many people saw you in this condition."

Max couldn't say anything. He slumped back in the chair where he had been sitting before. Unconsciously he put his hand in his jacket pocket and found the soft heavy envelope of lead foil folded around the finger-bone he knew—believed?—*knew* to be his own returned from an age of terror. He heard Lensch talking on the phone, but made no attempt to follow what he was saying.

He went passively through the motions in which he was directed—walked where he was told, extended his hand for attention, swallowed the tablets he was given to calm him. But his conscious mind was elsewhere.

A battle was raging in his head, a mortal struggle between the familiar rationality of what Lensch had told him and his own indescribable sense of conviction that he knew truth. Too late he thought of something he had wanted to say to Lensch, who had called his tale a myth : that even though a myth may not contain a single verifiable fact, it has its own truth formed of the congruency of a whole.

He looked at the shortened middle finger of his left hand, and thought with deep hatred of Lensch, now at this moment standing beside the operating table, supervising the anaesthetic machine as Kidwelly deftly removed the leg of Wilfred Fitz-Prior. That was a famous man ; newspaper bills announced his hospitalisation and medical bulletins were called for by radio and television ; personal messages came from the Premier and cabinet colleagues, wishing a speedy recovery to a man prepared to amputate a thousand million legs and arms and heads. The Secretary for War.

Oh, *God* ! Here in a clean sanitary hospital attended by a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, a full Professor, and a team of hand-picked nurses : the butcher. There in a world of dirt, squalor, cold, disease and ignorance : the victims.

If only FitzPrior and not Max Harrow could see the consequences . . .

His right hand, in the pocket of his jacket, closed convulsively. He drew a deep breath and repressed a desire to smile with grim satisfaction. Instead, he let his awareness come back from the great grey distances and focus on his actual surroundings.

Faulkner was talking in a low voice across the room to the nurse who had escorted him here. Max cleared his throat, and they both looked around sharply.

"Gordon, I—I'm feeling a lot better," Max said, choosing his words carefully. "I'm calmer now. I guess I've been giving people a lot of trouble, have I?"

With an expression of deep-felt relief, Faulkner came over to him. "That sounds more like your usual self, Max!" he said heartily. "You have been in a state, you know."

"I—uh—let things prey on my mind, I suppose." Max wiped his forehead, his heart pounding. "And I said some really terrible things to the Prof, which I ought to apologise for. Will he be in the theatre very long?"

"Now just a moment, Max," Faulkner said. "You're going home and to bed, and you're going to sleep the clock around before you do anything else. In fact, I was just going to arrange an ambulance for you. Diana rang up in a dreadful state of worry, and I promised you'd be back safe and sound within an hour."

Ingenious prevarications leapt automatically to Max's lips. "Gordon, if I go home in this state without a chance to clean up, that'll make it even worse. Could you see if you can find a razor for me perhaps? I'd like to shave and make myself presentable, at least; right now I must look—well, I must look like Smiffershon!"

After a moment Faulkner gave a hesitant chuckle. He clapped Max on the shoulder.

"All right, you have a point," he said. "Wash and shave, and I'll get you a taxi instead of an ambulance, because I think you're right about not alarming Diana. Nurse, see if you can dig out a razor for Dr. Harrow, will you?"

The nurse nodded and went out.

"I would like the chance to apologise to the Prof," Max went on. "I only need to catch him for a moment when he leaves the theatre, that's all. Surely a straightforward leg-amputation won't keep him very long."

Faulkner glanced at his watch. "I hear he was put out by what you said," he muttered. "Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea. He should be finished in twenty minutes or half an hour at most."

"Then I'll hang on for him by the theatre," Max said, getting up. "So as not to waste any more time than I have to before going on home." He pulled a wry face. "I really ought to take a rest, oughtn't I?"

t e n

Over the locked door of the operating theatre the sign glowed brightly : OPERATION IN PROGRESS—SILENCE—KEEP OUT. In the corridor Max waited, so wound up and tense he found it impossible to stand still.

It was nearly impossible, too, to prevent himself from wearing a sly smile at his own cunning. Here was the way to make sure that the evil nightmares driven by hate out of their own time into the past were visited not on another innocent sufferer like himself, but on one of those responsible for the monstrous crime to come.

He kept eyeing his watch impatiently. Time crept by, and the lighted sign still glowed. Members of the staff came down the corridor and glanced at him curiously, but news of his erratic behaviour had clearly not been permitted to travel too far, and since washing and shaving he looked rather more like his normal self, so no one questioned his right to be here.

Abruptly he noticed that the lighted sign had gone out. He darted back along the corridor and around a corner where he was concealed from the view of anyone coming from the theatre. He listened with concentration.

Clicking and sliding sounds—that was the door being opened. Footsteps, muffled by the rubber flooring, and the smooth sound of wheels perfectly oiled, tyres hushing rubber-on-rubber as the patient was taken to the lift at the far end of the corridor. Voices raised ; he recognised Kidwelly's high, rather womanish tenor commenting on the smoothness of the operation and lack of complications, and a suggestion from Lensch that they should have a drink together before lunch.

He waited till he was sure they had gone to remove their gowns. Then he moved back from his hiding-place and peered cautiously into the theatre.

An assistant was disconnecting the anaesthetic machine with a clinking of gas-cylinders ; a nurse was putting away unused instruments, having placed those which had been used in a tray of disinfectant ready for sterilisation. A large, tightly lidded aluminium dish stood next to the tray, and from one of its handles hung a label boldly lettered in red: FOR CREMATION.

"Open the other door for me, would you?" the young man at the anaesthetic machine said, taking the handles and tilting it back on its wheels. The nurse glanced around, put down the instruments she was sorting, and moved to comply.

Now was his chance. Max strode into the theatre, seized the big aluminium dish, and repressing a momentary start at its unexpected weight ran back with it into the corridor.

Behind him there were shouts, and then hurrying footsteps. He took no notice and refused to look back.

Down the corridor, clutching the dish, he tore like a man harried by devils. He had never thought how long these corridors were, as long as the endless passages of nightmare, every corner an obstacle like a blank wall.

"Come back ! Stop him !" The cries floated ghostly around his ears, and a huge drumming of blood blurred them into nonsense.

Now he was in the foyer, and alarmed people were leaping up in front of him. Nurses. The porter. Patients coming in or being discharged. He saw the porter move to bar his way through the big glass doors, framing a question, while a phone rang shrilly. He lifted the aluminium dish and held it like a shield, or a battering-ram, and went through the door with glass raining around him. Some of it cut his hands, he suspected. But what did that matter, when he knew he had only moments in which to fulfil his plan ?

Twisting and dodging between cars in the driveway outside, tidily parked to leave access for ambulances, he fled towards the road. It would have to be the same drain, he told himself muzzily. Otherwise there was no certainty that the bones would be found, that Smiffershon would use them to bring his visions of terror to Wilfred Butcher-FitzPrior.

Stinking Willy. Gangrened in his brain. I wish it was his head they were cutting off. Ho-ohhhh !

He almost fell to the pavement, the dish clanging down beside him. He paid no attention to the many passers-by, or to the traffic in the road which shot past scant feet from his bowed head. With bleeding hands he clawed at the grating over the drain where his finger-tip had fallen ; the bandage newly put on by Faulkner grew quickly filthy, and when he pressed on the raw stump stabs of pain shot up his arm, but he ignored them. He hooked his fingers in the grating and heaved, tugged, strained. Useless. It was immovable.

Panting, head spinning, lungs aching, he turned to the dish beside him. The lid, the damned lid, how did it come off ? Never mind the stupid morons standing and staring and asking

idiot questions all around—this is for their sakes, this is for the sake of the future. Got it off. Clanging on the ground. Pull out the thing inside, get at least *some* of it down the drain, a piece, a single little bone like mine !

A woman screamed a few yards away. Men shouted. A child squalled as it was dragged back from the gathering crowd. "Max ! Max !" Thrusting between the appalled spectators, Lensch followed by the hospital porter. Damnation, trapped, despair, oh God . . .

He got up, clutching to him the leg of Wilfred FitzPrior, his instrument for bridging the centuries, and saw nothing but the menace of those who had come to interfere with his plan. He whirled and ran, straight out into the road.

The car had no chance to pull up ; the driver stamped on the brakes, hauled on the wheel, but his wing struck Max Harrow behind the knees, breaking him down into a thing like a limp half-filled sack and hurling him to the ground.

The car's tyres, wet with his blood, skidded a long way.

"He ought to have been made to take a long rest after the death of his son," Lensch said in a distracted tone. On the desk before him, his hands fumbled at a paperknife.

Opposite him, Faulkner shrugged. "But he concealed the strain so well until the last day or two," he said self-excusingly.

"Yes . . ." Lensch didn't look up. "I went to see his wife afterwards, to ask if there was anything I could do. I found Scoreman at the house—you know, the GP who lives nearby—the one whose dog was killed by Smiffershon. "

Faulkner nodded. "What did he have to say ?"

"Oh, nothing much. He'd put her to bed with a sedative. Said he was going to get her to go and stay with her parents as soon as possible, to recover. Nothing else to be done."

"I guess not," Faulkner said. After a moment's hesitation he went on, "Prof, what was his motive for taking FitzPrior's leg like that ? Do you know ? Or wasn't there a reason—was it just an accidental consequence of his derangement ?"

"I—Oh, I suppose I might tell you. You were about his closest friend on the staff, weren't you ? And in case you see his wife you ought to know, so you don't say something by mistake." Lensch leaned back, turning his head to look out of the window.

"He'd constructed an ingenious and irrational theory about Smiffershon. On his argument, Smiffershon had somehow come here from the future, after a nuclear war ; this was taken to account for his peculiar language, his not knowing what woven cloth was, his tolerance of radioactivity, and his having survived to such an age while suffering from heterochylia. Max had apparently been having dreams along these lines, in which a top phalanx from a middle finger featured prominently. It's obvious that he subconsciously made certain, when his hand was trapped in the door of his car, that the appropriate finger was maimed—the one which matched the bone found in Smiffershon's possession, too, of course. It was supposed to be a sort of psychic link, if I understood him correctly.

"You told me yourself he was bitter against FitzPrior and politicians like him because he thought his son's death was due to radiation from fallout—well, this is very possible, and his reaction was a natural one given the circumstances. So what I suspect is that he meant to put the leg down the same drain where his finger-tip fell, in order that these people in the future should be able to send their nightmares to a person Max regarded as guilty of his child's death."

Lensch gave a wan smile. "Ingenious, isn't it ?"

"Very. So if only we could have formulated a rational explanation for Smiffershon, Max would never have gone insane." Faulkner pounded fist into palm. "Prof, we've got to solve the mystery of this damned tramp !"

"We will eventually," Lensch said with assumed confidence. "Your philologist friend is with him at the moment, I understand ; I'm surprised you're not."

"We had to limit the amount of time any given person spends in the same room, because his body is so hot ; if he blows at a Geiger counter, it ticks like a clock gone crazy. It's a minor miracle his week in the general ward didn't cause any harm as far as we can tell. Besides, Laura is the only person who can make shift to communicate with him at all."

"She's protected, of course ?"

"Oh yes. She wears a mask when she's in there, and showers and changes on coming out."

"Good. Well, look here, Gordon, I shall have about a quarter of an hour to spare before I leave this evening. I'd like to see Miss Danville and find out if there's been any progress. Will you ask her to call in ?"

"Certainly," Faulkner said, getting up.

Lost in thought, he wandered down the corridor towards the room where Smiffershon was being kept in isolation. He passed an irritated-looking nurse wheeling a trolley sealed air-tight with a polythene sheet. That was for Smiffershon's benefit ; he had to be rather more carefully treated than a man with smallpox.

Damn it, you could see why someone normally as level-headed as Max Harrow fell for his wild hypothesis, Faulkner thought. Smiffershon must be incredibly tolerant of radiation, as though he had been ruthlessly selected out of millions by a genetic filter. And where in this day and age had he obtained such a load of death for his bones and blood ? Max hadn't known, because he was under orders to stay at home when the crisis exploded, but a scarlet alert had been sounded regarding Smiffershon—the police had been warned, experts had been sent to the hospital and also to the places the man was known to have visited, to hunt for dangerous contamination. After all these days, they could still pick up a very faint trail, although luckily no one would have been harmed by the radiation—it was about as strong as a luminous watch-dial.

His line of thought broke off. Laura was coming out of the anteroom where she washed and changed after going in to see Smiffershon, and he quickened his pace towards her.

She greeted him with a dazzling smile and spoke briskly.

"It's turned out to be very interesting, Gordon," she said. "He's created a detailed fantasy to account for his condition, and I think I've got enough information to interest a psychologist now." She showed him a reel of tape she was carrying.

"I haven't quite finished interpreting what he's said today—I can't pretend I'm fluent in his extraordinary language yet. But as nearly as I can judge, he must have got hysterical over the threat of a nuclear war, and then got so involved in an attempt to make a detailed study—at least a linguistic study—of the consequences, that it turned into an obsession. For instance, he's assumed that diseases like the one he's got, which are attributed to radiation damage, would become so common that hardly anyone could eat the usual omnivorous diet, and land fit for growing crops would be so rare that you couldn't use any of it for grazing cattle or sheep—these would revert to the wild state, in any case—you'd use all of it for food, and clothes would have to be made of skins, hence his use of

' ki-yun ' for blanket. And he's developed some kind of theory about the return of superstition as a dominant factor in human life. This bone he had with him was supposed to be a magic symbol, a link with the past when people were happier and—Gordon, why are you looking at me like that? I know I'm probably using all kinds of solecisms because I haven't any medical training, but . . ."

Her voice trailed away, and her eyes searched Faulkner's face in puzzlement. He couldn't answer her. His teeth were suddenly chattering with a rattle like a Geiger counter.

John Brunner

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It was bad enough for Harding to see the girl knocked flying by the speeding car, but nothing to the horror when he found out what she really was.

OUT OF CHARACTER

BY STEVE HALL

o n e

Stuart Harding eased himself behind the wheel of his car and closed the door just as the rain began. Well, he thought philosophically, at least the weather had had the good manners to be satisfied with an overcast sky for the afternoon of the motor-cycle scramble, keeping back the moisture contribution until he had taken his dinner and got under cover.

He started the engine, and while it was warming-up, switched on the screen wipers at slow speed. As their rubber blades were industriously grinding two clean arcs through the dust layer accumulated over the last few dry days, he checked that his cameras and flash equipment were safely disposed on the back seat of the saloon.

The sky was completely covered by an even, dirty layer of cloud, super-saturated with the moisture of which it was now beginning to relieve itself. Between them, the vertically descending drops and the swollen, vapourous mass overhead, turned the evening into a premature night with efficient thoroughness.

Harding lit up his second after-dinner cigarette, pushed open the triangular driver's window sufficiently to ensure the extraction of smoke, and backed out of the small group of cars. As he pulled out of the parking space and on to the main road, a boisterous group led by a red-faced type sporting a bushy, ginger moustache, made their noisy way towards the crouching form of a black, 3.4 litre Jaguar, which looked eager to be let off the leash.

When he drew abreast of them, the traffic lights changed from green to amber, hesitated, then winked to ruby, leaving the Jaguar licking its chops impatiently at the two minute delay which it had to face.

Traffic was light, and Harding was soon touring along at a steady forty-five on the first lap of the eight mile journey to his bachelor flat. It had been a good day and he had secured enough excellent action shots of the scramblers to pay the rent for the next few weeks. The free-lance photographer was therefore in a good mood when the more powerful car hove in sight again in his rear mirror, obviously hell-bent on taking the lead in the homeward-bound stakes, and he kept well to his left as it swept to the off-side of the narrow road preparatory to passing. Harding's eyes flicked back to the way ahead again and saw something which his pursuer hadn't, so concerned was he with overtaking—walking towards them was a tall girl, forced to stay on the carriageway itself by the raised grass verge.

Simulating a bolt of black lightning, the Jaguar leapt past Harding's car, its massive power unit sweeping it irresistibly forward at the advancing female figure, whose head was bowed slightly to avoid the glare of the headlights. The photographer knew then that the girl was doomed, and watched in frozen horror as her tall figure cart-wheeled over the grass verge with all the abruptness of a puppet being removed from a stage when its brief appearance was terminated. The juggernaut flashed on its way, either uncaring, or unaware of the havoc it had wrought.

Harding swore aloud at the vicious scything down of another human by a motorised monster and brought his own car to a halt. On his side of the road, only a few yards ahead, was a lane which he knew led to a farm set half a mile back. Swiftly he reversed into it, leaving only his parking lights switched on. Then he leapt out, ducking and swaying to avoid the thorny embrace of the overhanging hedges.

The rain eased slightly as he crossed the road and slithered down the gently sloping embankment, flashing his torch to locate the stricken girl. Ahead and to one side, the white, probing finger of light picked out her still form. She lay head down the slope, flat on her back. Spread around her head and upper body like a shattered parasol, was the rough circle of her light coat and flimsy dress. Drawing nearer, Harding could see, pathetically exposed, the muddied white legs and the filmy nylon briefs. He knelt down on the slick, grassy surface and felt for a pulse in one limp wrist—none was apparent. With a sinking feeling of hopelessness, he fumbled under the left breast for a heart-beat. For a few seconds of amazed disbelief, his hand rested on the cold, wet flesh, before he realised that it was not only exposed, *but broken like a crushed doll's*. He snatched his exploring hand abruptly away and shone the torch full on the chest at point-bland range. *The flesh in the inverted V of the central rib-cage was gashed, exposing not human organs, but a mass of cables, linkages, and other metal components more appropriate to a machine.*

Harding stared long and hard at the thing before him. The face, the limp, wet, curling hair and the swelling mound of a breast proclaimed that it was a woman, but in flat and decisive contradiction, was the stark reality of the complicated, interior mechanism. Undoubtedly it was a marvellous facsimile of the female form, but how far and how well did the exterior impersonation go? His erstwhile sympathy having been explosively dissipated by the shock of his discovery, Harding decided to find out, and know all. With suddenly ruthless hands he ripped away the briefs and exposed the thighs—*the smooth pseudo-flesh and complete absence of female sex organs confirmed beyond all doubt that the thing on the ground was an automaton, with no more of true humanity about it than an animated window dummy would have possessed.*

Rapidly the resilience of the human brain re-asserted itself, and Harding realised that he had stumbled on something B I G. He got to his feet again and scrambled his way up the banking, taking the direct route upwards to the road. Hastily, he checked that the camera and electronic flash equipment which he took from his car were ready for action, then retraced his way to the stricken robot.

A few minutes sufficed to obtain four good exposures from various distances, including one close-up of the riven chest.

The last, brilliant flash, highlighted something else of interest, a white, plastic handbag a couple of yards further down the slope. Harding had opened it and was about to look through the contents in detail, when the drone of an approaching car sounded from the roadway above. The blinking, blue, rooftop lamp proclaimed that it was a police patrol vehicle. Harding guiltily grabbed an envelope at random from the miscellany of female impedimenta inside, closed the snap-fastener of the bag, and put out his torch. As the slowly moving car crept nearer, he flung the piece of womanly regalia towards the sprawling body and withdrew to the concealment of a clump of bushes, crouching uncomfortably behind their dripping, untidy branches.

The rain became suddenly heavier, and the patrol vehicle stopped about fifty yards along the road from the point where the robot had been toppled over the banking. Two policemen got out and wandered along the fringing grass verge. One of them was carrying something which Harding could only glimpse in the tantalising instances when the flashing light held by the other officer flicked briefly over it. The object looked roughly rectangular in outline and about the size of a shoe-box. The men stopped directly above the position where the broken body lay and the light beam probed down, feeling its unerring way over the grass to the exact spot. A dark figure extended a pointing arm and after a few mumbled words, the couple descended swiftly. Actuated by some sixth sense, Harding shrank down into his leafy screen, breathing in a careful, controlled manner, and for some reason beyond his power to explain, praying that no breaking twig or sudden sneeze would betray his presence.

Nearing the prone form, the man carrying the mysterious object said to his companion: "We can report that the new detector functioned perfectly on this first emergency."

Harding mentally noted that (a) the 'shoe-box' was evidently 'the detector', and (b) neither of the two were surprised by their find!

Both uniformed figures bent down. Further fragments of conversation drifted across to Harding overlaying the soft hiss of the rain in a macabrely weird fashion.

"How badly is she damaged?"

A pause, then, "Too badly I'm afraid—she'll have to be replaced, we can't afford to have any interruption in the schedule at this stage."

Another pause. "We can salvage the head, it's perfect. That'll make the replacement easy, we can graft it to another body. Hold the light steady a moment."

The crouching man watched in stupefied silence while one policeman opened the case of the detector and took out a cylindrical object which tapered to a fine nozzle. *Then he calmly detached his right hand from the wrist with a quick twisting motion and replaced on the limb the new, mystery device.* A thin thread of white fire jetted from the cone, and with a practised motion, the pseudo-policeman drew its beam around the female figure's neck and shoulders. *In seconds more, he detached the conical projector, refitted his hand, and gently lifted the blonde head from the torso.*

Harding took a tight grip on his shaken wits to throttle back the insane laugh which threatened to bubble up hysterically and give him away to the two mechanical policemen operating on their stricken comrade. He was beginning to wonder if the world, which had seemed so normal earlier, was entirely populated by monstrous creations with the sole exception of his flesh-and-blood self.

One of the couple was speaking again in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Better check the indentification number before we destroy her."

His companion complied, picking up the decapitated body's left leg and removing the stiletto-heeled shoe.

"Six, eight, dash seven," he said, and reaching into his tunic pocket withdrew a small something which he dropped inside the torn chest.

The two retreated a few yards and watched as the fallen figure's disintegration raced to the ultimate in well under a minute. Only a few, rapidly attenuating wisps of vapour and a faint, milky outline of powder, being washed away by the continuing downpour, gave any transitory evidence that there had ever been anything unusual on the grass.

Satisfied with their five minutes work, the two blue-clad figures casually made their way back to the waiting car, one of them carrying the female head in the crook of his arm like a hideous, latter day parody of Anne Boleyn.

Harding watched the winking light on top of their vehicle retreat well into the distance before he plucked up courage enough to return to his own concealed saloon.

t w o

Harding got into his car entirely oblivious of his wet condition, and lit a cigarette while he attempted to review the events which had occurred in the last twenty minutes or so. To say that they had bordered on the fantastic was to understate the case to a degree which itself was fantastic. No, he decided firmly, the happenings which he had observed were well into lunatic territory, or if he considered that he had been fully sane, they were so likely to result in disbelief from others that he would require first-class evidence to support his story.

Another thought came into his mind: supposing for a moment that the whole thing hadn't been an hallucination—and the photographs would settle that one—just how long had this situation been in existence, and just what proportion of humanity in the mass was *really* human?

Again, were the robots an up-to-date version of the old-style fifth column, ready to wreak havoc by sabotage when given the order by their masters? And anyway, who were the masters? Were they human or extra-terrestrial?

The boiling upsurge of questions and ideas whirled around in Harding's head like particles being accelerated in a cyclotron, until he felt like a man both blind and deaf searching for a needle in a lightless, soundless chamber, and forced to wear feather pillows for gloves. The more he considered the problem the more unreal reality seemed. What was *true* and what was *untrue*, and what was *meant* exactly by true and untrue? His hypnotised brain started chasing futilely around the closing spiral of spinning facts and fancies, at whose sombre centre lay a permanent and ultimate madness.

Harding sat in the car like a graven image, the internal light above the windscreen shining on his waxen features and glazed, staring eyes. The dusty ruby of the cigarette's burning end crept slowly nearer to his fingers. It was some time before the gradually increasing noise of the tapping on the side window roused him from his rapt contemplation of a whirling, private idiocy. Still half-submerged in the drugging mesmerism, his head rotated slowly towards the toughened glass panel. He stared blankly at the weakly illuminated face outside until the urgency of the incoming signals to his brain swamped out the persistent clamour of his thoughts.

"What's a matter?" he mumbled.

"Are-you-all-right?"

"Course I'm all right. Who are you and what do you want?" Through the distorting rivulets snaking down the glass, he could see that the head bobbing about outside wore a white skid-lid. His brain cleared rapidly and craftily—was this yet another facsimile human?

The girl ignored his first question about her identity and said, "My scooter's packed up. I was wondering if you could help me fix the trouble."

"Which way are you heading?" he asked, shadow boxing a little to gain time.

"The other side of Westchester."

He came to a decision. "I can't do anything for your bike, but we can shove it in the boot if you like and I'll give you a lift home—I live there myself."

"Fair enough," she agreed.

Harding switched on his headlights in the dipped position. Their lowered lances of light outlined the little machine standing forlornly at the edge of the main road. He opened the car door and followed his visitor, prudently thrusting a large screwdriver into his pocket in case he needed a weapon.

Together, they trundled the small vehicle to the back of his car, where Harding unlocked the boot-lid and depressed the release catch. With a faint creak of protest the counter-weighted system went into operation, swinging the cellulose-coated metal upwards like the yawning jaw of a trained whale. The couple managed to stow the scooter away inside, but its upthrust handlebar prevented the lid being properly closed, so Harding anchored it down to his rear bumper with a length of cord.

"O.K.," he said shortly, "let's go." He waited until the girl got into the passenger side, slammed the door behind her and trotted around the bonnet. The head of the unused screwdriver bumped against his thigh with an irritating series of thumps.

As he slid into his seat once more, the girl was removing her plastic helmet and shaking out a tumbling dark mass of shining hair with a typically feminine motion.

'That doesn't fool me one little bit,' thought Harding critically, 'it needn't necessarily mean that you're human.'

"My name's Lyn Wright," offered the girl. "I'm very thankful you could give me a lift, I didn't relish pushing the scooter the rest of the way home in this downpour."

When he didn't comment, but silently thrust his key into the starting socket, she spoke again.

"I was a bit worried about you a few minutes ago—you looked so still."

"Just having a quiet smoke before I pushed on," he lied as the engine fired. "I wasn't expecting visitors." He took a swift glance at her as he reached upward to switch off the inside light. A vivid image of her face remained fixed in his mind as the small lamp darkened. '*She* was small, dark and attractive; the *other girl* had been tall, fair and attractive. Probably this one is Mark II,' he thought with an inane mental snigger, 'they come in all shapes, sizes, and colours—roll up and take your choice while they're still available—every one guaranteed to last a lifetime. *She* had something wrapped around her left hand too—had she torn her pretty little pseudo-flesh? Don't cry; Daddy'll fix it with impact adhesive!'

"All right this side," said Lyn turning to face him, "and yours I think."

Again her words brought Harding back to the here and now. He strove to stabilise his jittering thoughts and steered the car through the ninety-degree turn.

"I'm Stuart Harding," he said, and dived around in his memory for conversational ideas. One came. "Have you been to the cycle meeting too?"

"Yes, but I was silly enough to stay to the end and then have a meal. If I had left when the clouds began to thicken, I probably wouldn't have had my breakdown. Where were you?"

"Various places," Harding replied evasively. "I was nipping around getting some photos for a news agency." Considerations involving the more mundane world suddenly impressed themselves upon him. "I've just remembered, I promised to hand them in before 9.30 tonight, d'you mind if I call in at my place and process the film before I run you home?"

She hesitated briefly. "No, I suppose not, after all, if you hadn't given me this lift, I'd probably have been even later getting back."

"So far, so good," exulted Harding silently. "I'll think of some way to establish whether she's human or not before she gets out of the flat."

Shortly afterwards, the rain ceased and the car swished onwards at a faster pace so that it was not very long before they drew up in the quiet cul-de-sac where he lived.

"Come on in," he said, leaning across and opening her door. A faint whiff of perfume came from her hair when his face was near to her's. 'This one's the fancy job,' said his cynical conscience.

Lyn slowly followed him inside, carrying her helmet upside down by the strap. She looked absurdly like a small child at the seaside, clutching a bucket and ready for an orgy of sand-castles, but a little doubtful about its ability to cope.

He switched on the electric panel fire and watched its horizontal rods start to glow.

"The bathroom's in here. Would you like to wash?"

She unwound the handkerchief from her hand and inspected it critically. "I would like to clean a scrape I gave myself back there—it's not a bad one really. I suppose I'm just not cut out to be a mechanic." The girl moved off towards the wash-basin before Harding could actually see the hand. "You go ahead and fix your film."

'Clever stuff,' approved the jeering voice in his head, 'but not clever enough to get rid of me.' He moved around aimlessly until he heard the sound of water and soap being splashed about, then followed the girl into the bathroom.

"I forgot to tell you where the ambulance kit was," he said, "now let's have a look at that hand."

"It's all right, I can manage," said Lyn, still blocking his direct view of her hand.

Harding took out a tin of adhesive dressings and some antiseptic cream. "I'll fix it," he said firmly.

Slowly and obediently, she turned around and held out her palm. The cut was roughly an inch long and centrally placed. It must have been quite deep, as it was oozing blood slightly, after having been disturbed by the removal of the improvised bandage and washing.

Harding's inward cynicism abruptly changed to relieved sympathy. She was human. Robots didn't bleed—he knew that from experience. Taking her fingertips gently, he swabbed

the wound with liquid antiseptic noting with approval their tiny contraction as the greenish fluid penetrated to the living tissue and stung it.

"That's quite a nasty one," he observed. "This will sooth it." Harding smeared on a generous layer of cream, following it with an overly large dressing. "Now sit by the fire and warm up," he ordered. "I won't be a moment with these films."

Lyn sat smoking quietly while he raced through his processing and printing.

It was 9.20 when he emerged stuffing a bundle of completed pictures into an envelope.

"Sit tight," he said, "I'll just whip these around the corner then maybe you'd like some refreshments."

Lyn only had time to nod her head before Harding was gone. She heard the car start up, recede into the distance, then in minutes, he was back again.

"Mission accomplished," he grinned. "Now what about some coffee?"

t h r e e

"I hope you don't mind," Lyn said, "but I've looked around a little and got a few things ready."

Harding blinked. "That was pretty fast work."

She smiled. "You didn't exactly crawl yourself; thirty seconds earlier and you would have beaten me to it." The dark-haired girl disappeared momentarily into the tiny kitchen, emerging with a tray, coffee pots and hot, buttered toast. "How do you like it? Black or white?"

"Ivory," he said, hanging up his wet raincoat and relaxing before the cosily gleaming fire.

Lyn poured a cupful and stacked a plate for the photographer. "Now, Mr. Harding, suppose you tell me what you were really doing when I came up to your car."

"What makes you think it was any different from what I said? And the name's Stuart—Stew, if you prefer." He munched on a finger of toast appreciatively and waited for her answer.

She looked at him shrewdly. "I've done a little relief nursing from time to time, and I've seen patients in shock—you reminded me of them. Of course, if the matter is something

personal, I'll bow out. But if it will help to have a second opinion . . . ?"

Harding decided to take the plunge. "You'll think what I'm going to tell you is the ravings of a lunatic, so before I do tell you, I'd like to show you something."

"Not *etchings*?" she queried with a mischievous twinkle.

He smiled faintly in return. "Modern-day etchings." Picking up the camera he continued. "After I'd finished at the scramble today, I loaded with a fresh film. This is standard practice—you never know when you'll see something worth getting—so it's best to be prepared. On the way home tonight, I thought I saw a girl bowled over by a car which didn't stop, and I took some pictures of the body."

"Did you pause to see if she was alive first?" asked the girl a little derisively.

"*She was never alive.*"

Lyn let that one pass for a moment. "What did you mean, you 'thought' you saw a girl?"

Harding took the film from the camera.

"I want you to watch me develop this and produce some prints from it before I say any more. Normally, I process films in a tank, but this time I'm going to make an exception and do the job in a dish so that you can see every step. That way you'll be sure there's been no trickery."

Lyn was getting used to Harding's slightly dogmatic spasms and didn't argue, reasoning that it was best to let him tell the story his way. She did, however, scrutinise closely every move from the pouring out of the developer to the final fixing of the full-plate enlargements. When they were dry, he told her his story without embellishing anything. From time to time, he illustrated a point by referring to the pictures.

"So that's why I was going quietly mad in the car," he finished. "I'd begun to think that the whole world was peopled with them—that I was all alone with mechanical facsimiles."

She shivered a little and drew closer to the gleaming rods of the electric fire. "And you thought that I was another of them?"

He nodded. "Until I saw that cut on your hand bleeding I was convinced that you were."

"What were you going to do about it?"

"God alone knows—clobber you I suppose—I hadn't really got it worked out."

"And now?"

"Now, I know that there's at least two of us." He kissed the back of her injured hand thankfully.

Lyn didn't draw it away, and they sat for a little while holding hands firmly, knowing that a bond had been forged between them.

At length, the girl spoke again. "Why don't we take these prints around to your news agency—they ought to be quite a scoop."

"I don't know," Harding prevaricated, although he was secretly pleased at her use of the 'we'.

"What's the matter—are you thinking that the robots may be in control there as well?"

"Old Erhart a robot? No, I've known him too long to suspect that. But it's a pretty weird yarn to tell anyone."

Lyn thought for a moment.

"You don't have to tell him anything first off. Just show him the photographs and wait for him to ask for the story behind them. You can always pass it off as a joke if he absolutely refuses to believe you."

"I suppose you're right," said Harding. "Anyway, I can't think of anything better to do, so we may as well try it."

They finished off the rest of the toast and coffee, then went out to the car.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather me take you home first?" queried Harding.

"It's not past my bedtime yet," she answered, "I'd like to see the last episode for tonight."

For several reasons, some of them obscure, others not at all difficult to understand, Harding was glad that Lyn had decided to accompany him.

As he edged the car out of the cul-de-sac and into the main road, another car shot past their bonnet, missing them by scant inches—the driver didn't look their way or slacken speed or deviate from his course by one iota. He had behaved as if they weren't there.

"My God," said Harding vehemently, "I know he had the right of way, but he didn't have to make it so glaringly obvious—if there *had* been a collision he would have suffered too."

"Better take it easy," counselled his companion, "I don't think this is one of your nights."

"You can say that again," he agreed, and took careful stock of the road before venturing right out.

They saw no other vehicles on the half-mile journey to the agency, and parked the car on the open forecourt in front of it without further incident.

When they went inside, another man was talking to Pop Erhart across the little counter. As he turned side-face to them, Harding recognised Thomson, a young reporter on the local newspaper.

"O.K. Pop," he was saying, "I'll try and get some more griff on the story for you by tomorrow—g'night."

"Working late, Dick?" asked Harding.

The younger man brushed past him and went through the outer door as if nothing had been said.

"What's with our friend?" asked Harding, addressing Erhart, who was leaning on the counter staring after the departing reporter.

The white-haired agency man did not reply, so the photographer tried again. "What do you think of these, Pop?" He spread the shots of the robot on the counter top.

Erhart's fixed stare didn't flicker at all, and he stared through, rather than at, Harding's face, as if it were a pane of glass, before turning around and disappearing into the back-office. At no time had he shown any recognition of his visitor, listened to his words, or looked at the proffered photographs. The whole series of events in the agency office began to take on a familiar nightmarish quality for the photographer, and once again doubts about the *realness* of reality began to swirl through his brain. He turned around, half-expecting Lyn to have disappeared, but she was still there, and her presence reassured him somewhat.

"Did you see all that as I did?" he demanded.

She nodded. "They both acted as if we weren't here."

"What in heaven's name is going on?"

She shivered suddenly. "Someone's walking over my grave—let's go."

Harding was inclined to be argumentative. "I'm darned if I will—I want to know what old Pop is playing at. It's one thing when a cocky young pup like Thomson ignores you, but

for old man Erhart to do it . . .” His voice trailed away in baffled disbelief.

This time, Lyn wasn’t disposed to yield to his dogmatism, however.

“Look,” she said reasonably, “neither of them could have become suddenly stone deaf and absolutely blind, could they?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Well then, there must be some other reason, correct?”

He nodded unwillingly.

“So wouldn’t it be wiser to think things out in a bit more detail rather than barging in after the old man and causing a scene?”

Harding forgot the immediate problem for a moment and gazed at Lyn in admiration and some wonder.

“Now I know why they say that women are deceivers ever,” he said.

She looked at him perplexedly. “What are you talking about?”

“You,” he answered. “Here you are tackling me with rigid step-by-step logic to persuade me against bursting in on old Erhart.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing; only the fair sex, according to popular mythology are reputed to be creatures ruled by intuition only.”

“Right now, there is no clash,” explained the dark girl. “Both logic *and* intuition advise me to get out of here.”

Before Harding could comment, the outer door swung open again. Dick Thomson came in and marched up to the counter.

“Pop,” he called, tapping on the formica top with a half-crown.

The old man came out from the rear of the premises. “What’s the matter, forgot something?”

“Yes,” said Thomson. “I’ve just remembered that I won’t be able to call in personally with that story tomorrow, so I’ll have to phone you—O.K.?”

“What time?”

“About 8.30 to 9.”

“That’ll be all right,” confirmed Erhart.

The reporter waved his hand. “Good-night again.” He walked directly between Stew Harding and Lyn without batting an eyelash in either direction.

As before, Erhart watched him go out, then headed for the back-office, shaking his white head slightly and mumbling something like : " He'd forget his brains if they weren't in a sealed container."

Once more the two men ignored Harding and his partner—not with rudeness or indifference—but *rather as if they were sublimely confident that no-one else was there !*

" See what I mean ?" queried Lyn.

Frigid-footed centipedes were crawling up her companion's spine and on to his head, and for once he didn't argue.

" You're right," he said, and together they went out to the car.

f o u r

When they were in the car again and moving away from the agency building, Harding scrutinised his watch. " Thirty," he said, " time to take you home."

" Yes," Lyn said, " I don't think there's anything more we can do tonight."

As on the previous occasion when she had used the collective pronoun, Harding felt a tingle of pleasure.

After a slight pause, Lyn spoke again. " What do you propose doing tomorrow about the mystery ?"

" Let me sleep on it," he suggested. " You do the same thing and I'll give you a ring before noon, then we can compare notes."

And so, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, their next contact with each other was settled without undue maidenly modesty or masculine reticence.

As he drove home to his flat, Harding kept a weather eye open for hare-brained drivers. Although the late-night traffic was sparse, there was undoubtedly something strange about its movements, and he found through trial and error, that the safest position by far was that of the 'boot-bumper'. By sticking about three yards behind a car going his way and matching speeds exactly with it, he managed to avoid the nerve-wracking swoops made by drivers following him. More and more he felt like an insect trapped in a complicated machine whose gears and cogs were grinding and meshing all about him. The insect would be a fragile intruder in such a situation

courting unimaginable hazards and dangers as it frantically tried to keep one jump ahead of utter destruction.

Finally, if the photographer needed any additional proof that things *were* abnormal, it came as he pulled towards the centre of the main road and stopped in preparation for the right-hander into his cul-de-sac. Ahead of him and approaching from a short distance, was a heavy lorry. Behind him, and coming up fast, another car was motoring with its offside wheels on the centre line. Harding's rear trafficator flashed out regular warning bleeps of orange light, but the onrushing car was obviously not going to make any attempt to pass on the inside. A cold mosaic of sweat-beads formed on his forehead. He felt as if he was a fly, paralysed at the muzzle of a gun with a fifteen inch shell hurtling up the barrel.

The lorry crept towards him at an agonising snail's pace. He took one last look in his mirror, slipped the gear lever into bottom, revved up the engine with the clutch pedal rammed well down, and stood ready for a crash dive. The car was only scant yards behind and bearing down on him like an enraged mastodon when the tail-board of the truck drew level with his front bumper. Harding released the clutch pedal explosively, all thoughts of finesse were gone. His engine roared, tyres spun and smoked, but his machine leapt to the side with the alacrity of an electrified Jack-in-the-Box—to safety. For the second time that night he had missed being rammed by the skin of his teeth.

Harding sat quietly smoking in his bedroom. For the time being he felt that he was in an oasis of safety. With the car shut away in its garage, and he himself inside his flat, he felt he was no longer intruding upon events beyond his real control. As he undressed and got into bed, the word 'intruding', which had sunk away into Limbo with the rest of the thought, fought its way back to the surface again and floated around tantalisingly, inviting him to consider the proposition further. He pondered over the situation. How *could* you be an intruder in a world of which you had been a part for twenty-eight years? But had he *really* been on Earth for that time? What proof did he have?

'I can prove that you have,' said his memory emphatically, and produced a series of recollections of the past as evidence to support its contention.

Harding reviewed them critically, phlegmatically—and found them lacking in real substance. His memories of the immediate past months *felt* like a part of him ; events from ten and more years back *did not*. Probing even further back to his childhood, produced only fragmentary, cartoon-like glimpses of an existence that seemed to belong to someone else—there was no real continuity or solidity about them. Was this due to the natural blurring caused by the erosion of time ? And was it even *natural* for time to wear away detail ? After all, modern theory said that the brain forgot nothing with which it had been in contact.

His mind reverted to the more immediate past once more; he felt a definite kinship, one-ness, integration, with the happenings he recalled, he was part of them and they part of him—for the rest, he felt doubt—the broader question now seemed to be not just how *real* was *reality*, but how *much* was *reality*.

Sleep wrapped its intangible mantle around him with an insidious and comforting subtlety, and his speculations wove themselves into strange dreams. He was in two places at once. He was a disembodied eye regarding scurrying little figures; one of which was himself. All of them except him, moved their limbs with a mechanical jerkiness and stiffness, and were gradually becoming slower in their actions. Out of an overlying cloud, a pair of gigantic hands swooped down upon the scene. One of them held an enormous key, the other scrabbled impersonally amongst the unheeding manikins, lifted one, rammed the key into a socket in the small of the back, gave it a few turns, then lowered the little figure back to continue its game with renewed vigour.

Harding's disembodied consciousness became increasingly horrified, as one after another, the pseudo-humans around his corporeal body were hoisted aloft for an injection of mechanical revitalisation, while all others on the ground either ignored or were oblivious of the happenings in their entirety.

His all-seeing vantage point abruptly winked out of existence and he was in his body only, with the senselessly moving replicas of men and women all around him performing their parody of life.

He glanced around craftily with his secret knowledge of the hands which wielded the key of life, determined to retain

his freedom of movement—somehow, he knew that if the hands caught him, he would become one of the wound-up toys and be a party to their clockwork gyrations.

Massive fingers suddenly moved towards him, already starting to curve together in anticipation of the grip they would shortly have upon him. Harding throttled back a mounting panic, fully aware that he was fighting for his sentient existence, and ran frantically under the Brobdingnagian extremities of the unseen giant, reasoning that the second or two necessary for them to stop and then change direction might give him his chance to escape. He ran, twisting and turning among his companions like an inspired Rugby forward, bouncing full-tilt into some, ricocheting off others, until he reached a more open area.

He looked up. Above him, inclined at an angle of forty-five degrees beneath the cloud layer, extended the titanic, twin columns of monstrous forearms, the hands were out of sight groping for him between the buildings. *Between the buildings ! Buildings !* He could *hide* in a building until the watcher above grew tired of seeking for him. Opening a door, he crept inside, closed and bolted it, and leaned on its painted surface sobbing with relief. He was *safe*. His eyes roved up the walls, following a pattern on the paper—and his mouth opened to scream—there was no roof on the place; *it provided no more cover than a lidless box !*

Already, one of the arms was moving, and a huge, descending forefinger was veering his way to coax him into the open where he could be grasped and captured. Harding wrenched back the door-bolts, babbling incoherently at the small delay while they slid aside and the probing digit came nearer.

He was in the open street again, running with the head-rolling, foot-slapping action of an escaped convict who has fled for miles before a pursuing pack of dogs. He turned into a narrow street between higher buildings, maybe there was extra security in the shadow of their cliff-like walls. A door opened ahead of him and a girl stepped out—it was Lyn. She recognised him and held out her arms in welcome, oblivious of the terror from above. Harding didn't stop in his dead run, instead he grabbed one of her hands and dragged her along with him, ignoring her pleas for an explanation.

With the frantic need to maintain the pace of his flight against the girl's retarding pull, his lungs laboured more strenuously until every breath felt like an inhalation from a blast-furnace scorching the inside of his chest.

Ahead of him, through the dimness of his fading vision, he saw long, almost parallel shadows on a sunlit patch of road, and wondered vaguely what they could be. Too late, the realisation hit him—one hand was overhead! He skidded to a stop and looked behind. There was no hope that way—the other hand was approaching fast, rushing towards its fellow like the closing jaw of a nutcracker.

Harding screamed aloud in his desperation, and awoke with the scream upon his lips, into a world whose lurking strangeness in the watery light of dawn seemed only slightly less ominous than that of his nightmare.

five

When he got up later that morning, Harding had the beginnings of a rough but startling theory to explain the happenings of the night before, the trouble was to decide what to do next. Then he remembered the envelope which he had taken from the handbag just before the police car had arrived. He took it from his raincoat pocket. Across its top edge it carried the imprint O.H.M.S., and inside was an Income Tax assessment form. He felt disappointed at so prosaic an object, until he remembered that at least it would give him some information about who the 'girl' was masquerading as, and where she was from.

The name on the envelope was Teresa McDonald, and the address, 26A Burlington Buildings. It sounded like a block of flats or tenement he decided.

He smoked a cigarette thoughtfully, and then made his promised telephone call. When the double signal had repeated itself six times, he was beginning to wonder if anything had happened at Lyn's flat during the night, then abruptly the sound was cut off in mid-burp and she answered.

"Lyn Wright here, is that you, Stew?"

"Yes," he replied, trying to control an anxious quaver in his voice. "I was just starting to think something had happened at your end overnight."

"Sorry for the delay," she apologised, "I was collecting a parcel from the postman. You were the only thing that happened last night, otherwise all quiet."

"Good," he said. "Now tell me something: suppose we hadn't met last night, what would you have done today? Did you have anything arranged?"

"Not with anyone else if that's what you mean."

"No," he explained, "I'm not fishing for information about boy friends, I just want to know what your programme would have been."

"Well," said the girl, "I had intended going to the second day of the motor-cycling meeting."

"Excellent. So did I. Now, can you call at my place by, say, three o'clock?"

"I could," Lyn began, "but I thought that perhaps . . ."

"That perhaps I would come around for you," he interpolated. "I'd love to, but I don't think either of us should deviate any more than possible from what we would have done if we hadn't met last night."

She was obviously both intrigued and mystified.

"Why on Earth not?"

Harding hesitated. "I'd rather not explain over the phone. You see, you would have come past my place today anyway, so I'd like you to do just that, *but be very careful of traffic when you turn off the main road.*"

"I'm always careful—*don't worry.*"

"Be extra cautious," he said cryptically. "I had some more fun and games coming home last night."

"All right," she replied. "By the way, what will you be doing with yourself between now and then?"

"I'm going around to the agency."

"Don't do anything hasty there, will you?"

It was his turn to be reassuring. "*Don't you worry—I'm due to go around to pick up a cheque for some work I've done for them—old Erhart said it would probably arrive this morning, so it's completely normal for me to go there, that's why I'm going.*"

"Are you planning on saying anything about last night?"

"Not unless he does—I've got other ideas about the next move."

"Well, be careful, won't you?"

"I will," he promised. "Apart from anything else, I want to be sure of seeing you this afternoon."

When he drove around to the agency, all traffic was behaving normally again with no more than the usual percentage of impatient drivers.

Harding parked his car on the paved forecourt and walked inside.

Erhart was standing behind the counter, one silver lock of hair drooping over the sidepiece of his metal-framed spectacles.

"Good news for you, Stoo-art," he beamed, over-emphasising the first syllable as he always did. "It's come, like I said it would." The old man fumbled along the counter and scooped up a bunch of envelopes. He pushed his glasses up on to his forehead, peering at the bundle nearsightedly from about three inches until he had located the one he wanted. "There you are," he said, handing it over.

"Thanks, Pop," said Harding casually, slitting the flap and vetting the cheque inside. "You look tired. Did you have a busy time last night?"

Pop Erhart smiled and shook his head, the drooping lock of hair flipping back up into place.

"No. After you had gone, I only had young Thomson in for a few minutes, and shortly after he had left I packed up for the night. It must be old age I suppose—it doesn't come on its own you know."

The old man's mundane remark and bland countenance almost convinced Harding that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

"Yes," he replied inadequately, "it comes to us all sooner or later. Well, take it easy, Pop."

The silvery head nodded and the forelock slipped down again. "You'll be in as usual next week, will you? I'll have your cheque for last night's pics by about Wednesday."

"O.K.," answered Harding huskily, throttling back the urge to pour out questions about the previous night. "See you then." He left the building and journeyed home again, mingling with traffic that accepted his presence as part of the natural order of things.

Harding was waiting at the window when Lyn steered her scooter alongside the kerb outside and drew up. He opened the front door and welcomed her in.

"Well," she started, once they were sitting down, "how did it go at the agency?"

"Exactly as I'd expected—perfectly normal. Old Pop Erhart acted as if nothing unusual happened last night."

"And that was how you *thought* it would be?"

"Yes. You see, I've got a theory that while we do what is normal for us, everything else meshes with it and nothing untoward happens. But once we step out of character, so to speak, things start going haywire."

"Are you telling me that everything we do in our life is pre-ordained?"

He nodded slowly. "I don't like to admit it, but it does seem to be something like that."

In the face of her unbelieving look, he hurried on to justify his statement.

"Look, just accept for a minute that things are that way. Something went wrong with the timing schedule last night and started off a new train of events that weren't supposed to occur. I don't think that girl robot was meant to be knocked down, otherwise why would the two pseudo-policeman salvage the head and say that they were going to graft it on to another? And if she hadn't been put out of commission, I wouldn't have stopped and taken pictures and discovered that she wasn't human. Again, I wouldn't have been dreaming in my car quietly going mad when you arrived."

"Aren't you putting a pretty weird interpretation on things that could possibly be explained more simply?"

"I haven't finished yet," he retorted grimly. "After we'd come back here and gone out to the car to go around to the agency together, you'll remember the way that car shot past our bonnet *as if we weren't there*."

"I've seen that sort of thing happen before," she said, but doubt was beginning to creep into her tone.

"What about the fiasco in the agency," he demanded. "Have you ever experienced anything like that?"

"Not exactly," she hedged.

"No, neither have I. And that isn't all . . ." He described his narrow escape in the traffic on the way back from her flat. "The whole thing adds up to this," he finished, "if the Jag had passed me sooner, the robot wouldn't have been knocked down and none of the other peculiar things would have happened, and we wouldn't be sitting here talking now because we wouldn't have met."

Lyn frowned fiercely trying to spot a flaw in his argument.

"But everything *did* happen the way you've described it, so surely Fate or who-ever, is stuck with the result."

"Not so," Harding demurred. "Fate is *never stuck* with anything in my view. Consider the broad possibilities open to us as of now : we could go on with our life either separately or together ignoring what happened last night—I mean not trying to find out anything about it ; or we can do something about it, individually or collectively.

"Now, I'm convinced that if you or I try probing into matters for explanations, we'll be stepping out of line to such an extent that the pattern of life will be disturbed too much for it to continue without correction. In which case, we'll be eliminated.

"As far as the other alternative is concerned i.e. forgetting everything, wittingly or unwittingly, I've been involved, so I want to know the answer."

"What about handing the whole thing over to the authorities?" suggested Lyn.

"I can't hand it over to *anyone*," he said bitterly. "Look at the reception I had when I tried to show the photographs to Pop Erhart—he didn't see them, you or me. And as for the authorities, when the police themselves are robots, in part if not altogether, where do you go?"

"All right," she agreed, "I'm convinced, so what's our next move?"

"There's going to be no joint effort," he answered bleakly.

"You must resume your life as if we'd never met—that way, you at least will be safe. I'm going to have a go at finding out more myself."

Lyn stared at him for a moment. "You know," she said, "if I didn't know better, I'd say that you've just tried the most complicated brush-off that any girl has ever had to contend with."

"It's *not* that," Harding said lamely, "I just want you to be safe and not involved."

"I think you've had things your own way far too long," answered the girl with mock severity, "it's time you realised that the world isn't only your oyster, it's mine as well—I *want* to be involved."

Her lips were so close that there seemed to be only one thing to do—so he did it.

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She drew away from him a little. "Now if I can repeat the question, what do we do next?"

He looked at her fondly for a second.

"You *know* what I mean," she added.

Harding blinked and came out of his rosy haze reluctantly. "I wasn't going to tell you this, but after I'd been to the agency this morning I went around to the blonde's address, I got it from this," he waved the Income Tax envelope. "She's there all right, as large as life. So I'm proposing to go around again now and try something out."

"What?" asked Lyn, a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"If all goes well, I'm going to nab her and ram her in the boot of the car."

"That sounds completely mad. We can hardly do that in broad daylight without being seen."

"I think we can, my sweet," he said fatalistically. "If I'm right about this staying in character business, *no-one will see us*, because that would be well and truly out of character."

"And if you're wrong?" she pressed.

"I imagine we'll find ourselves in the nearest police station so fast that our feet won't touch the ground."

"Suppose nobody does see us kidnapping her—what then?"

"I'm going to stop somewhere lonely, establish positively that she is a robot, then destroy her."

"What for?"

"I don't know who's behind this racket," Harding replied grimly, "and I haven't the faintest idea where to start looking, so I'm banking on the fact that they'll come looking for me."

"Those policemen might turn up again."

"I'm betting on that too," he said, "and if they do, this will take care of them." He opened the lid of a bureau and took out a big, heavy automatic. "It fires explosive bullets."

Lyn was obviously more than a bit shaken by his daring proposal. "Don't you think you're being too extreme?"

"It's a rather extreme situation," he returned shortly. "Do you still want to come?"

She hesitated for only a moment. "All right, but we have to be absolutely certain that she's a robot before we start any dismembering or shooting."

"That should be easy, she'll have a mark around her neck and shoulders where they grafted the head on, remember? If that doesn't show, we might have to think again."

Five minutes later, they were en route for Burlington Buildings and Teresa McDonald. Once again, vehicles all around them were behaving as if they didn't exist, but in daylight it was easier to see them and take evasive action, so that there were only a few heart-in-the-mouth incidents on their way over.

Harding reversed into the driveway in front of the eight-storey block and stopped.

"Now what?" prompted Lyn.

He looked at his watch. "She's due out in about ten minutes. I heard her arrange to meet another 'girl' at the corner down the road."

Passers-by strolled along the main road, but none came into the drive during the next ten, nerve-wracking minutes, so they had no opportunity to test out Harding's hypothesis that no-one could see them.

Eventually, Harding, who was staring intently in his interior mirror, called sharply and jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "There she is!"

Lyn turned around. There was no doubt that the face of the blonde girl standing in the main entrance was the same as that of the robot in Harding's pictures. She started walking towards them, keeping on their side of the drive.

"Just the job," he approved, "it doesn't look as if I'll have to move the car."

The pseudo-woman was only twenty yards away and approaching dead on course when he opened the driver's door and stepped out.

"Stay here," he warned and strolled around to the back of the saloon.

Only ten yards separated the blonde from the car when he swung the boot-lid up and waited confidently. Her legs flashing rhythmically, she strode forward, heading for the exact centre of the vehicle. Her left leg came up and collided jarringly with the bumper bar. Without a sound, she cart-wheeled over, momentum taking her into the boot's cavernous maw.

Harding slammed down the lid and locked it. Fastidiously, he picked up one shoe which had fallen to the ground, and resumed his seat in the car.

The populace at large went on its various and sundry ways, completely oblivious of his bare-faced actions, although at least a dozen had been in a position to have seen everything.

"Phase One completed," he muttered, as he started the engine and moved off. Behind them, thrashing sounds emanated from the luggage compartment and continued steadily as he drove the car cautiously through a circuitous, back-street route and out of town. Occasionally, a muffled voice could also be heard, not screaming or protesting, *but apparently carrying on one side of a conversation!*

Lyn's face was white and strained as they accelerated along the main road towards the lane entrance where they had met the night before.

Harding flogged the car and himself to the limit of their collective abilities, drawing away from vehicles behind and keeping a safe distance from those ahead. All the way, he was praying that he could swing across the road and into the lane without trouble. Luck was with them, and they managed to park there without incident.

"What's going on back there? queried Lyn, motioning towards the back of the car.

"Can't you guess? She's going through the motions of meeting the other girl; walking along and talking to her on their way to the pictures. All according to the script."

"What do we do now?"

"Any minute they'll be 'arriving' at the flicks, so presumably she'll stop babbling and stay still. Then we can have a look at her."

The voice and movements from behind suddenly ceased.

"Action stations," said Harding, opening the car door. "Mind the branches as you come around." He lifted the boot lid cautiously.

The robot was on its side facing away from him, knees drawn up as if in a sitting position.

"I *do* like James Garner," it said dreamily.

"See what I mean?" remarked Harding. He bent forward and pulled down the neck of the thin blouse on the robot. "There it is." His finger traced the outline of the thin, unmistakable, scar-like junction where the head and neck had been joined to the new body. "Oh well, let's get on with

Phase Two." He pulled out the heavy automatic and rammed the muzzle squarely in the middle of the robot's back.

"Wait," said Lyn suddenly, clutching his arm. "Look what's happening."

The vehicles passing along the road nearby were slowing down and stopping. From the horizon all around, a stygian blackness was rushing towards them with a frightening velocity, blotting out the landscape as its circular outline contracted rapidly inwards.

"I think you're going to find out what's behind it all," stammered the girl. "Now!"

"My God," he mumbled, "what have I done?" Harding had time to put his arms around Lyn, then the blackness closed in upon them.

The mind which had been Stuart Harding's drifted through strange dimensions, drawn ever faster towards an unknown destination. The journey may have taken aeons or micro-seconds, for who can measure Ultimate Time? It matters not—eventually and inevitably, he approached his goal. The wandering fragment of consciousness dropped into its place within the framework of a larger sentience, and the mind mosaic coalesced and became one. The complete entity became aware of its *wholeness* and recognised the glorious, shimmering body of his mate Li-Ri reclining nearby.

She stirred gently, and her mind joined his, embracing and contributing to the group awareness that was theirs alone.

A third presence joined them.

"I hope," said the Director, "that you two have a proper appreciation of the trouble caused to our unit's production."

"Precisely what happened?" said Stu-Har.

The Director sighed. "Because of our hurry to catch up with the schedule, we made some mistakes in the exact timing of several events in the sequence. Also, due to the rush in casting, we didn't measure your personality indices with sufficient accuracy and only transmitted an inadequate fraction of your mentality into the protoplasmic puppets which you were to animate. The whole catalogue of errors resulted in you both *believing* that you were human beings."

"Imagine that," whispered Li-Ri, "we *really* believed in the fantastic creations of an author's imagination!"

“ Well,” said the producer, “ are you ready to try it again ? We are behind schedule with the recording as it is, and our sponsor is not to be trifled with. This time we’ll transfer a little more of your real selves—enough so that you’ll know *who* you really are, and that the Mechanoids are filling parts not important enough to warrant a living actor being wasted on them. But don’t let this knowledge spoil your performances ; these minor character roles will be quite important experience for future careers in the entertainment industry.”

The two mental fragments that had been Lyn Wright and Stuart Harding drifted back to the set again, but this time they were just a little larger, and a trifle more self-possessed.

Harding drove his car out of the hotel parking space towards the traffic lights. Close behind him, the 3.4 litre Jaguar followed, impatient to be in the lead.

The lights blinked from green through amber to red, and obediently, he stopped.

The Jaguar’s engine emitted little purring trills of power while they waited.

When the lights winked to green again, Harding eased his car around the corner and waved the following car onwards. It swept by, the ginger-moustached Mechanoid at the wheel waving its pre-set gesture of thanks.

A little later, he passed the tall, blonde, female Mechanoid plodding along through the rain. The car swished happily onwards—it *was good to be an actor*, he thought, *as long as you didn’t become too immersed in your part*.

—Steve Hall

‘Gone Away—No known address’

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us known in good time.

After a short spell in jail, the result of his last adventure ("Under the Lemonade Hat," Science Fantasy No. 53) Hek Belov returns to the world of computers gone mad and Emilio Batti's excellent cooking, only to land in yet another jam.

MOBIUS TRIP

BY EDWARD MACKIN

'If they give you paper with lines on,' a great revolutionary once said, 'write the other way.' In other words, friends, assert your precious individuality. Make things as awkward as you can for the uniformed bully, the know-it-all psychiatrist, and that curious busybody, the sociologist. Nowadays, these latter two are sometimes combined in the psychosociologist, and I was being interviewed by one.

She sat across the desk from me, and read through a document in a thin folder, glancing at me from time to time. Finally, she replaced it in the drawer to her left, and fixed me with her pale blue eyes, a washed-out forty trying not to look fifty.

"Mr. Belov," she said, "you are being released tomorrow after serving three months imprisonment. What do you intend to do? Have you any plans?"

I nodded. "I'm going to make a wax effigy of the Governor, and stick pins in it."

She looked startled. "Surely you don't believe in that ridiculous mumbo-jumbo," she said, and when I didn't answer. "Well, do you?"

"It's just a hobby," I answered, evasively.

"I don't suppose the Governor will lose any sleep over it," she said, forcing a smile.

"He will when I send it to him," I told her. "Particularly when he sees where I've stuck the pins."

"That will do," she snapped, getting to her feet. "I've had enough of your nonsense. Lie on the couch, and relax. I have some questions I'd like answered."

I lay on the couch as directed and relaxed as much as I could, letting my arms hang over the sides, slackening my jaw, and half-closing my eyes.

She suddenly lost her temper. "For heaven's sake!" she protested. "Do you have to look like a congenital idiot? I just want you to relax, that's all. You men are all the same. I ask you to relax, and immediately you jettison your intellects."

I de-relaxed, and waited.

She finally got a grip on herself. "To grapple with the problem of your vindictiveness," she said, drawing on her oxygen reserves, "and the grudge you have against society, we shall have to go back to your childhood. Just tell me all you can about this period. Were there any traumatic experiences? Anything that shocked you?"

"Plenty," I told her. "But there is one incident that really stands out in my memory. I was little more than an infant at the time."

She leaned towards me with a concentrated frown, eager to catch every word. Heaven knows what she expected, friends. "Yes?" she said, pencil poised at the ready. "Just take your time, and tell me all about it."

"Well, it's easily told. I was in the local pleasure park, enjoying myself in the innocent way children do, when my nanny pushed me into the duck pond, and limped out of my life forever."

"That must have been a simply terrifying experience for one so young," she said, writing it all down. "Have you any idea why she did it?"

I nodded. "It may have been because it was the third time that morning that I had succeeded in giving her the hotfoot."

"Quite," she said, icily, and tore up the paper she had been writing on. "Mr. Belov," she added, "my report on you will point out that you are an incorrigible liar, a malingerer, and a confirmed cynic."

I grinned at her. "I didn't think you cared," I said.

Just before I was released the following day, I received a lecture from the welfare officer, a young man who took his job very seriously.

"See if you can't make a fresh start," he wound up. "This might help you a little."

I found myself holding a pound note.

"God bless you, Mr. Copperfield!" I said, touching my forelock. "But aren't you afraid I might move in on the National Bank, or make a bid for European Holdings?"

He whipped the pound from my fingers. "Get out!" he said, simply. "Your kind are completely irreclaimable!"

I snapped my teeth at him. "That thought will keep me warm all winter," I told him.

I could have said a lot more, but I wanted to get out of that place. Later I sent him an urgent flash card, care of the Governor. It said: "The twins are sick. When are you going to let me have some money? Your loving Iris."

With the few shillings I had left I was on my way to Emilio's restaurant when I was stopped on Fourth Level by a large man wearing tinted glasses. His pale, moon face was expressionless as he asked: "Aren't you Hek Belov?"

For a sickening moment I wondered which of my many creditors had caught up with me. The proportions, and the voice were familiar somehow. And then I had it. "Great heavens!" I exclaimed. "Harry! Harry Schultz as ever was. I didn't recognise you in the blinkers."

He nodded. "I hardly knew you through them. It's the current mark of distinction. They have a built-in set of idiot cards, in the form of a film, on any subject you like." He took them off, and showed me.

By pressing a tiny feed-button, scraps of information, formulae, and other similar rubbish could be made to appear on the outer surface of either lens, and because of the composition of the material was suitably corrected for viewing without an added screen or illuminant.

"You can have a speech prepared and itemised by the suppliers," Schultz said, enthusiastically. "It's a boon to the busy executive."

"Glory hallelujah!" I said. "What next?" He put them back on again, and smiled at me. "Throw them over the Level," I advised him. "What you can't remember was never worth saying anyway."

He shook his head. "That's where you're wrong. Unless you are prepared to surround yourself with all the trivia of our civilisation, and bow the knee to the gimcrack, you are out of step with the age, and that could prove most unfortunate. You could find yourself permanently penurious, and forever clobbered by circumstance."

He had a meaningful look for me, of course, the swine !

"How true," I said, wondering how to approach him for the loan of a fiver. "You have the makings of a philosopher, old friend. You have indeed. So you are in the chips, eh ? Well I always said you were a great man, Harry. I wonder if you could possibly help me over a very trying period. A fiver would do."

He took out his wallet, and handed me a small, white card. "Come and see me at this address. I'd like you to have a look at, er—some equipment."

He was making off when I grabbed him by the arm. "You forgot the retaining fee," I reminded him.

"I led into that, didn't I ?" he said with a faint grin. He extracted a five pound note from his wallet and handed it to me. "I'll expect you tomorrow. Is that all right ?"

"I'll be there today," I promised. "I just cancelled all my engagements."

He looked at me speculatively and sighed. "I hope I'm doing the right thing," he said.

I patted him on the shoulder, reassuringly. "Don't you worry, old friend. It was a lucky break your meeting me. Your troubles are practically over—whatever they are."

He shrugged, and took the south strip. I went on my way to Emilio's. A good meal was what I needed more than anything else just then.

Two hours later I was outside the Anderson Development Foundation, West 42, Third Level, which was the address on the card Schultz had given me. It was a great, untidy looking place, built for the most part of sand-tinted pre-cast. Inside I encountered a rather officious commissioner, who wore a bright blue uniform with gold trimmings, which looked like something out of an early twentieth-century musical, and was almost certainly designed by a woman. He had a face like a sick ferret, and a reedy voice to go with it.

"Yes ?" he asked.

I showed him the card. He turned it over and over distastefully, and handed it back to me.

"Please state your business," he demanded, surlily.

"I have an appointment with a Mr. Harry Schultz," I said, patiently.

"Mr. Schultz is out," he told me, and went into a little room on my left, closing the door after him.

There was a window marked *Enquiries*. I opened this and looked in at him. "You should do something about those ingrowing toenails," I said. "They must be right the way through to your liver."

He slammed the window down, and we glared at each other through the glass. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder, and turned to see who it was. Schultz beamed at me.

"Take no notice of Sergeant Trinkle," he told me. "He's all right when you get to know him."

"Like a broken leg," I said. "Have you tried setting fire to him?"

Schultz smiled. "Never mind. Wait till you see the job I've got lined up for you. Come on."

He pushed open a door, and I followed him down a long corridor. Near the end we went through another door, and into a small, well-furnished office where a blonde stenographer typed delicately on an electric machine. She looked up as we entered, and a tiny frown creased her forehead.

Schultz smiled at her. "Ask Mr. Anderson if he can spare a few minutes," he said. "Tell him I've got Mr. Belov with me. He'll understand."

She indicated the door behind her with a slight movement of her head. It had a glass panel on which was inscribed the words *Chief Technician*. "Mr. Anderson is in conference, Mr. Schultz." The little frown vanished and was almost replaced by a smile. "He said he wasn't on any account to be disturbed; but if it was important you could try the day after tomorrow."

Schultz nodded. "Fine. That means he is practising his swing. Come on, Hek. Mr. Anderson will see us at once."

The blonde gave a little shrug of her elegant shoulders and went back to her typing. I leaned over as I passed her.

"The Andromedans just landed at Thames Reach." I informed her. "Great hairy beasts with ten arms, and a partiality for blondes. Don't you care?"

"Not if the roof fell in," she said, coolly. "I've got a fully comprehensive."

"Come on," urged Schultz, standing by the door. "Haven't you ever seen an iceberg before?"

"I never talked with one," I said. "It's an experience."

He opened the door, and we both ducked, simultaneously. Something small and white shot over our heads, and rolled across the carpet. I took a quick glance. It was a ball of paper. I followed my friend into the office of Mr. Anderson. A tall young man was standing with his legs splayed, swinging a golf club. He regarded us with some slight annoyance.

"I can't be disturbed," he told us. "Get out."

"Later," said Schultz, imperturbably. "This is Hek Belov."

"Is he really," said the young man, with a brief glance in my direction. "For heaven's sake, Schultz," he added, peevishly, "can't you see I'm busy? I'm practising my swing." He changed his grip slightly, and concentrated on the six balls of paper laid out in a row on the carpet, driving them expertly one by one against the door.

"Hek, this is Arthur Drobworth Anderson the younger," Schultz told me. "He masquerades as our chief technician. Mr. Anderson, please, if you would just lend me your attention, Mr. Belov is here to sort out—we hope—you know what."

Arthur Drobworth Anderson raised one eyebrow to indicate attention. "Do I?" he said, vaguely. "Well that's probably important, too. Let me know if there's any progress; but not for a week or two. Goodbye, Mr. Belov. It was nice meeting you. You should take up golf."

"I'm caught up in the bigger game," I told him.

He evinced some slight interest. "What's that?" he asked.

"Survival," I said. "Throw your money away. You're missing all the fun."

"Like falling downstairs," remarked Schultz. "Come on, Hek. The Foundation can't afford more than one incumbent."

We headed out and as we passed the iceberg I glanced at what she'd just typed. It said: 'Look me up again when you've made your first million.'

I looked at her, and she smiled sweetly. "Honey," I said, very conscious of some scent or other that she was wearing, "by that time the million won't matter either."

"You should try harder," she advised, huskily, and suddenly my collar felt rather more than tight.

"The incentive's there all right," I admitted, just about keeping my hands off her; "but you've caught me on one of my off days. Meet me outside the Great National Bank tomorrow. I'll have it in five bags." I shambled out after Schultz. "I should be playing the big league." I told him. "I have such taste."

"Forget it," he grinned. "It's all in the packaging. Anyway, I didn't get you here to make sheep's eyes at our Miss Humbit. I want you to have a look at Project 713. It didn't turn out quite as we expected. Here, through this door."

He held it wide for me, and I went in. It was a fairly large room with benches down on one side, and several tables on which reposed a varied assortment of electronic hook-ups. All along one wall was a gleaming mass of switchgear, and at the end of the room was that monstrosity the Watkins-Gore Multiple Computer and Translator. This is the one that can break down speech forms in any language, bung out a free translation, and then go on to process it through several stages until it is reissued as a mishmash of mathematical equations along with a whole lot of hoo-ha, including what the semantists call trend lines.

"A nice place," I said. "What happened to the staff?"

Old Belov wasn't born yesterday. It wasn't just the lack of staff. I'd noticed that everything was switched off; not a green light anywhere, and not the faintest suggestion of cyclic hum.

"Well," said Schultz, fingering his chin, "as a matter of fact they left a week ago. You know, one of those lightning disputes that are apt to flare up in the best regulated organizations."

"Quite," I said, looking round. "Tell me, old friend, which one did the lightning strike?"

He laughed, a shade uneasily. "You always were a shrewd operator, Belov. Yes, something did happen to a member of the staff. I should have told you about it in the first place because you can't tackle the problem without knowing all the details. Stupid of me."

"Write to me about it," I said, moving off. "Any time within the next ten years will do. I shall probably change my address."

The way I saw it, with jobs so hard to get these days, for a whole staff to voluntarily quit their posts some king-sized horror must have caught up with one of their number.

"Surely you wouldn't desert an old friend," wheedled Schultz. "Things may not be quite as bad as you imagine. After all, I'm still here, aren't I?"

That was a point. As I remembered him, in the few odd spots we had been in together, whenever danger threatened Schultz could always be found running the other way.

"All right," I said, "tell me. What did happen to the late lamented?"

"There you go again," he complained, "jumping to unwarranted conclusions. The fellow isn't actually dead. It's hard to say what he is really, apart from being a damned nuisance! Anyway, it was his own fault. Project 713 should never have been started."

"There was some obvious danger?"

"No, it wasn't that. Just between you and me we had a good number here, plodding along well-established lines of research; but we spent half-a-million of the Foundation's money and the pressure went on for something spectacular to show the principal backer, John Heathwaite, because it was felt that he was cooling off."

I nodded. "Heathwaite of *Heathwaite Supplies Inc.* I did a small job on a computer for him about three years ago. It took me two years to get the fee. A mean man. A very mean man."

"Well, you see what we were up against. The project I initiated was, I am afraid, largely spurious. We were just playing for time."

"Heathwaite wasn't the only backer," I pointed out. "If I remember correctly there is a great deal of public money involved, and you just can't play ducks and drakes with public monies. It's criminally dishonest. Have you no ethics?"

Schultz elevated his shoulders. "I know," he said. "I don't sleep sometimes thinking about it; but I don't sleep sometimes anyway. Let me explain about the project."

"It won't do you any good. You may not have any ethics to speak of; but my code of conduct has always been impeccable."

"You're just windy," he sneered. "Look, Hek. Sort this lot out and you've got a job for life with the Foundation. I'll personally see to it. How does that sound?"

"You mean you want me to be a party to your nefarious conduct?" I was disgusted, I can tell you. "What's the salary?"

Well, one has to live.

"I knew you'd see it my way," he grinned. "Seven-thousand per annum. Welcome to the Anderson Development Foundation. Our proud motto is 'What Can Be Done Will Be Done—Someday.'"

"And a very fine motto, too," I said. "I only hope I can live down to it. All right, Schultz, you can lay it out for me, now. What was the horrible thing in the woodshed?"

"Bragden," Schultz informed me. "Raymond Aloysius Bragden. He had the bright idea of pursuing a line of research he had flirted with when he was younger. It was based on some crazy notion he had about projecting an image without the aid of light. Apparently he had some small success; but there didn't seem to be any commercial application for his discovery, and only Bragden could tell the difference between a normal image and this molecular image in any case. Just about this time funds ran out, so that was that. Well . . ."

"Before you go any further," I broke in, "you might explain the term molecular image."

"Sorry," he apologised, "you're not in the picture there, are you? A molecular image, according to our friend Bragden, is a solid surface representation of the object used. In other words, this machine projects a thin skin of molecules which, when they contact the screen or anything else, in fact, remain as a permanent impression or image, although it can be pushed around."

"Even after the machine is switched off?"

He nodded. "Bragden did a series of modifications; the aim being to get a clearer and thicker image. We used a pound note at first. I think we had some idea of reproducing them by the hundred, forgetting that we were limited to the thickness of the note itself. On one of the projection tests we found ourselves left with the image; but no note. For some reason Bragden had taken hold of the note by one corner, possibly to shift it, and the next thing is that his image is on the wall to one side of the screen. Of Bragden himself there was no trace either. You see, this thing doesn't project in the way that light projects. It sets up a vibration that apparently loosens

the surface molecules, and then the power end cracks in with a split-second surge that's way up in the millions, and the loose image is sloughed. It shoots outwards until it encounters a solid surface, and there it sticks. I suppose Bragden was subjected to the same molecular strain because he contacted the object under stress."

"Where's the Bragden image now?"

"In another room, still holding the pound note. We were able to slide him along the wall through the door, and along the passage-way. Would you care to see him?"

"No," I said. "That might make me an accessory after the fact, or something. I don't suppose you've been to the police?"

"I'm not altogether stupid. Of course I've been to the police. They've searched the whole place from end to end. I believe they regard the whole thing as a leg-pull. It never hit the news. The police blocked it for some reason. They've listed Bragden as a missing person. He was a bachelor living alone, and we haven't been able to turn up any relatives. There the matter rests as far as the outside world is concerned. The rest of the staff handed in their notices right away, and I haven't seen any of them since. They had an idea that if the molecular vibration could be transmitted by just taking hold of the object there was a good chance that it might be transmitted through the floor they were standing on."

"That's alarmingly feasible," I said, looking around the big lab. "Which is the projector?"

"Over here," said Schultz, moving diagonally across the room. He paused by something that looked rather like a giant polaroid camera, except that there was no lens, only a mass of steel strings where the lens might be, all radiating outwards, and then continuing onwards at right angles into the bowels of the thing.

Schultz pointed out the holding frame they had used for specimens, and then indicated the control unit, which was situated at a short distance from the machine.

"Voltage, vibration, molecular tuning and focus are all controlled from here. Any questions?"

"Yes. Are you sure that the damned thing is off?"

"Not only off, but disconnected. We're as safe here as anywhere."

I didn't bother to work that out. Instead I went round to the rear of the thing, and pulled the inspection panel away. Most of the rig was unfamiliar ; but I could follow the circuits through. Just one thing puzzled me. This was a big, screened block on the top rack. All the fine, steel wires found their way into this, and there were three separate, but associated, circuits that took it in.

"What's in the big meat can ?" I asked. My own guess was a K unit, with high-vacuum equipment. "It looks important."

"A mass of coils, capacitors, and a couple of multipliers. Something like a K unit. All high-vac. There's a vibro-coupler, too. That was Bragden's baby."

It was more or less what I'd expected. Give me one end of a circuit, and I'll draw you the rest. It's a gift. You either have it, or you haven't. I think in terms of solid circuitry, and the whole thing had fallen into place now. I flipped the layout over, as the inner eye cut in, just like flipping over the pages of a book. It was all so crystal clear, and yet . . . There was something odd about it. Something that didn't add up. A circuit error ? Possibly ; but I didn't think so. It all fitted so beautifully.

"Well, any ideas ?" asked Schultz.

"One or two," I said. I had a million ; but mostly on how to spend seven-thousand pounds, supposing I got it. "Just leave me with it for a while."

I took an inspection lamp, and examined the circuits minutely. When I turned to speak to Schultz he wasn't there. So I sat back on my heels and swore. The front end of the K-can had gone. Probably sloughed off gradually by the inter-molecular vibrations. Some of the metal had been deposited across the terminal points of an adjacent choke. That meant a tremendous rise in voltage and a consequent strain on the reservoir capacitor, an electrolytic, which had gone o.c. Result, no power. Switching the thing off had been superfluous. No-one had dared examine the thing, of course. Not since Bragden had got plastered, as it were.

I went in search of Schultz. The delectable Miss Humbit told me that he'd gone for lunch, and that I'd find him in the "Kit Kat," on the same block. When I walked in he was picking at a plate of chicken.

"Sit down," he invited. "What would you like ?"

"If you're paying I'd like a lobster salad," I said, "with all the trimmings."

"Did you sort it out?" he asked.

"It was too easy, and I've got a suspicious mind. The obvious is seldom the total answer."

He avoided my eyes. "We'll talk about it later," he said, and poured himself a glass of dry sherry.

A rather leggy brunette, wearing the shortest of short skirts took my order. "What are you doing tonight, sweetheart?" I asked.

"I'm bathing the twins," she told me. "Would you like to wash or dry?" She gave me an acidulated look and walked away.

Schultz laughed. "Don't look so put out," he said. "I've been trying to date her up for a month."

"A married woman? Shame on you."

"Penny's not married. That twin stuff is just part of the routine brush-off."

After we'd finished our lunch I took an envelope from my wallet, re-addressed it, stuck a piece of scrap paper inside, and on the way out I gave it to Penny.

"Get the twins a rocking horse," I said, patting her on the rear.

"Oh, thank you, sir," she giggled.

I shot after my friend and practically dragged him along the Level.

"Hold on," he protested. "What's the idea?"

Just then there was the characteristic sound of a pie hitting a man, and an amazed Schultz scraped meat off the back of his neck while he looked back at Penny.

"You cheapskate lousy bums!" she shouted. "You ever come here again and you'll regret it!"

"For heaven's sake," he said, still scraping the debris from around his neck and ears, "what's the girl on about?"

"It's the weather," I said, pulling him out of the line of fire down a sideway. "It affects Celts in that peculiar way. Did you notice she had a slight Irish brogue?"

"But she threw a pie at me," he complained, lugubriously. "Why should she throw a pie at me?" He looked at me as though I might be able to provide the answer.

"Are you sure you didn't order it?" I asked him.

"Of course I didn't damned well order it!" he shouted. "Do you think I'm in the habit of having my pies delivered in that fashion? The girl must be mad."

When we got back the young Mr. Anderson was putting his golf clubs in his hoverjet, which he had parked near the entrance.

"Oh, there you are," he remarked, with a smile. "I'm just going to the links for a couple of rounds. I've left a note for you. It's to let you know that my father will be over this afternoon to see what progress has been made on the new project. He's bringing old Heathwaite along with him." Arthur Drobworth Anderson the younger placed a well-manicured hand on the shoulder of Schultz. "Do your best, there's a good fellow. I shouldn't mention Bragden, if I were you. There's a good chance he still doesn't know." He turned Schultz around, and looked at the back of his neck. Bits of pie still clung there. "You're a terribly messy eater," he said, distastefully. Then he climbed into the jet, and waved to us. We watched him take off, and went inside.

I stood looking at the projector. Schultz sighed. "All good things come to an end," he said. "I'm going to have a wash, and change my shirt," he added. "See you in about half-an-hour. I don't know what we are going to do about Heathwaite. I really don't." He went out.

I wasn't very sure myself; but I had the makings of an idea. What we wanted, of course, was a molecular projector that worked, and a valid application for such a useless invention. We also wanted Bragden; but he'd have to wait.

The thing was to convince Heathwaite that we had something worth developing. A little chicanery was perhaps permissible here. After all, the whole of the Anderson Development Foundation was at stake, and a lifetime of well-paid scientific dilettantism for the lucky staff. I might well be one of that happy number. Not that that weighed with me, of course; but one has to live. However, after further consideration, I decided against it. I've got a yellow streak of honesty down my back a yard wide since my last stay in gaol.

Schultz was positively nervous as we waited for the elder Anderson to show up with Heathwaite. After nearly an hour, during which I managed to fit a new K-unit, with suitable

modifications, including an additional reverse-bias circuit, Schultz sent out for a bottle of Scotch. We had this three parts drunk when Anderson and John Heathwaite walked in.

"Afternoon, Schultz," said Anderson. "This is Mr. Heathwaite. He'd like to know how the project is coming along. So would I for the matter of that."

Then he noticed me. "Who the devil's this?" he asked.

"Just a wandering minstrel, sir," I told him, bowing low. "I'd give you a lay on my lute; but I had to hock it to pay the Performing Rights people their performing dues, and now that I've hocked it I can't perform. Have you ever known such vicious squares?"

Schultz laughed a trifle hysterically. "You kill me!" he said. "And you might as well," he added, suddenly sobering up.

Anderson forced a smile, and turned to Schultz. "They've been celebrating the successful completion of the project," he said. "Isn't that so, Schultz?"

"You mean they broke through on the reproducer?" said Heathwaite eagerly.

Heaven knows what he had in mind, or what Anderson had been feeding him.

"All the way" Schultz lied. "Allow me to introduce my colleague, Hek Belov. He was largely instrumental in providing the answers that led to our final success. Is that not so, Belov?"

"Quite," I agreed, wondering what the hell he was talking about.

We shook hands all round, and Heathwaite asked for a demonstration.

"Certainly," I said, and switched the molecular image projector on. I waited for it to warm up, completely forgetting that there was nothing in the frame to project. "I have—er—modified the original circuit to include an extra K-unit, positively biased, to provide reverse vibration," I told them. "I forget why."

I must have had a very good reason for doing it; but it had slipped my memory. I watched the meter needle rise towards maximum, my back to them, while I pondered this problem; but the whisky had a half-nelson on my brain, and all it wanted to do was lie down and give up. I turned to say something to

Schultz, and instantly my brain jumped into action, and rang every alarm bell in my system.

Schultz and the others were legging it for the door as fast as they could go. Curiosity is not one of my vices. Someone was running. I didn't need to know why. I overhauled them in grand style, and we reached the door in a bunch, finally bursting out into the passageway, and fighting our way into the room where the blonde sat, still typing. I nursed a bleeding nose, and watched Schultz's right eye redden up, and swell alarmingly.

"What the hell are we running for?" I asked him.

Anderson was locking the door with a key he had snatched from a rack on the wall. Heathwaite shook his head bemusedly. "Some reproducer," he said, and went out through the door that led to the lair of Sergeant Trinkle, and the outer world.

Miss Humbit left her desk, and regarded us a trifle cynically. "The last boat just left," she said. "What did we hit this time?"

Schultz was pointing back in the direction of the laboratory. He looked distraught. His mouth moved in some kind of explanation; but no words came out. The blonde took a cup of water from the dispenser and poured it over him. His voice came back as though someone had switched it on.

"... more than fifty of him. For Pete's sake switch the damn thing off!"

"Of course," said Anderson. "The emergency switch." He raced across the room and opening a wooden box on the wall shoved his hand in and pulled down the handle of a large switch. "That's fixed it," he announced.

"Fixed what?" I asked.

"That," said Miss Humbit, "is the premier dollar question. Why don't you go and see what they're yammering about?"

"That's a pretty interesting question, too," I said.

"Aren't you going?" she asked me.

"Not to put too fine a point on it—no."

"Coward! Someone's got to pick up the pieces. Oh, for goodness sake, stay where you are. I'll go."

I must say it took a great deal of moral courage to watch a woman do a job that was really a man's; but I have never been short of this commodity. She was back in less than a minute. Anderson cautiously unlocked the door and let her in.

"You must have had a nightmare," she said. "I can't see anything out of the ordinary."

"It's hard to explain what we did see," Anderson said. "I was looking straight into the projection frame and quite suddenly every one of those wires seemed to mark off an impossible angle, stretching right back in a kind of tunnel . . ."

"That's right," Schultz interrupted. "It went way back ; but it seemed to be reaching out to encompass us as well. There were some strange colours there, too. Some of them I'll swear I'd never seen before, and I can't remember now. That wasn't all, though. Advancing along every angle was a dimensional puzzle that had the vague outline of a man. It—they, if you liked, although they seemed to be a unity somehow—was Bragden. Another half second and I felt I'd be right in there with him. That's why I got out—fast."

Anderson nodded. "That's about the size of it. The question is what do we do now ?"

The blonde took a coat from a steel locker, and slung it on. "I quit," she said. "I've got a rooted objection to spending the rest of my life in puzzle corner, and I've no yen to share a hypotenuse with some crumby square from the other two unrelated sides."

"Well spoken," I said, appreciatively. "You won't forget the Great National Bank, will you ? I'm still working on it."

"Don't flip your top, Buster," she told me ; "but I might just settle for the bare half-million." Then she breezed out, slamming the door after her.

I eyed the door, speculatively. "Yes," I murmured, "well . . ." I was beginning to be sorry I had taken that retainer. I glanced at the other two.

"The fellow that can straighten this out is in line for a substantial reward from the Foundation," Anderson said, loudly.

"A permanent position, too, I suppose, sir," put in Schultz.

"Naturally," agreed Anderson. They were both looking at me. "A permanent, well paid position," he added, carefully.

There are times when I wish I wasn't so greedy. Safety lay through one door ; but I strode to the other door, and opened it. "You just bought yourself a sucker," I said, bitterly. "Remind me to have my brains removed sometime. I'm getting into bad habits."

"Like courage and that?" asked Schultz, slyly.

I ignored him.

Everything seemed normal. That is to say, there was nothing in the room that might be termed unnerving. I went over to the projector, and switched off. "You can put the main switch on now," I told Schultz. "I'll want some light here."

He went out, and I snicked some of the light switches to the on position. After a while the lights blazed on, and Schultz returned.

"Okay," he said. "What's the drill? Have you any ideas?"

That's Schultz. Always asking other people for ideas, and using them as footholds to further his ambitions, the swine! As it happened the ghost of an idea had begun to tease my intellect.

"Ever heard of the Möbius strip?" I asked him.

"Of course. It's a way of traversing both sides of a plane figure without crossing the edge."

"Something like that," I said.

"The simplest form," said Anderson, "is a strip of paper given one twist and then made into a continuous band, and then . . ."

"All right," I said, impatiently; "so we all know what a Möbius strip is. Well, maybe you'll understand when I say that I believe Bragden went on a Möbius trip?"

They didn't, of course. I wasn't sure that I knew myself. Without knowing why I felt that Bragden had built better than he knew. Whatever it was it had illogical extensions that took it into another level of consciousness, and it had taken Bragden with it. It was really a corner of his mind translated into electronic units and synapses. A corner of his mind that led off into the realms of the subconscious, and the other side of the waking world. The other side of the strip that lies below the threshold of sleep. An error, based on a misconception—because he hadn't known where his inventive devil was leading—had provided the Möbius twist in the strip. Thither had gone poor Bragden—the incompetent, doodling, dithering damned idiot!

"What about that second K-unit you stuck in?" asked Schultz, suddenly. "What was that supposed to do? You never explained."

I bent it on to provide balance, or something. Instead it had put another twist in the strip, and a glimpse of what was going on underneath.

"Your mathematical brain wouldn't appreciate the off-beat reasoning behind it," I told him. "Better not try it. The hiatuses could get you if you didn't watch out. What's the betting I can spring him?"

"If you have to turn it on to do it I'm going," Anderson said.

We watched him walk rapidly to the door, and disappear, "Let's get started," I said to Schultz, who was looking worried. "Cowardice is a luxury we can't afford just now."

Still working close to my hunch, I adjusted the bias on the K-block, and switched on. We stood near the open door just in case ; but I don't think either of us was prepared for what did happen.

A man suddenly appeared about three feet from the projector. He came towards us, and then another man, his twin, appeared in the same spot . . . and then another !

"Bragden !" exclaimed Schultz. "In triplicate !"

I belted for the main office where the emergency switch was located, and yanked it down. Schultz was right behind me. Again we locked the door ; but curiosity overcame my fear, and I stood on a chair in order to look through the glass panel over the door. Outside six identical Bragdens looked up at me. I stepped down. We were besieged by simulacrums.

"Marvellous," I said. "Do you think you could hold them off while I go for the police?"

"Why bring them into it?" asked Schultz, peevishly. "They'll only end up by arresting us."

He had something there. We were stuck with the problem. Not for the first time I felt as though I had been caught up in the charge of the Light Brigade. They'd have had to tie me to the horse at that.

"God blast the crows !" I said. "Six similiar crumbs, and one of them could be the real Bragden. The question is which?"

The crowd of Bragdens in the corridor were becoming restive. There was a confused babble of voices, and a hammering on the door. I looked at Schultz, and he rubbed his hands together miserably and looked back at me. Then I clicked my teeth as inspiration struck me. I had it.

"There's just a chance we can sort them out," I said.

"Do you really think so?" asked Schultz, hopefully. "If you can pull it off I'll erect a statue to you with my own fair hands."

"Pay particular attention to the ears," I said. "They're my best feature."

"I'll give you four," he promised.

"That's damned generous of you," I said, shaking him vigorously by the hand. "You're a grand fellow; but someone should shackle you to a ghost. Anyway, this is the way I see it. Bragden's mind is open-tuned. Open over a broad period of time, that is. These doppelgangers, or whatever you like to call them, are the rough tuning of a slow mind. The problem is to speed it up, and make it more selective, fine-tune it to time."

"I get it, more or less," frowned Schultz; "but how do we tackle the situation? Speed his mind up, I suppose. Of course! That's it. Feed him some pep pills. The question is, though, which is Bragden? The real Bragden, that is."

"They all are," I told him; "but at different time settings. Get the dope, and I'll see if I can talk them into taking it."

Schultz went out, and was back again ten minutes later. He found me barricading the door with some of office furniture. "They were trying to break the door down," I explained. "Did you get the sharpeners?"

He showed me some little yellow tablets in a plastic box. "I don't know what they are," he said. "Drugs are not my field; but the chemist assured me that they would turn a two-toed sloth into a squirrel."

"That probably means something," I said. "Let's see what it does to Bragden."

I had to break a glass panel over the door to communicate with the Bragdens. I talked to them amidst a confused babble of voices, and after a while they listened to me. Then I threw a tablet down, and one of them caught it. Instantly they all had one. I watched them chew the things, and swallow as one man. After this we gazed at each other for a few minutes, waiting. I ignored Schultz, who was impatiently demanding information as to what was happening.

Nothing did happen until about five minutes had passed, and then I noticed that one of the Bragdens was becoming blurred. It was like someone seen in a bad light. Then it

happened to another, to three others, and I could see the corridor wall through two of them by this time. One by one they vanished altogether ; one by one except for one. I opened the door and let him in. By now his reactions had quickened to normal.

"Welcome home," I greeted him. "What's it like in the umph dimension?"

"Like hell with the fires out," he said, grimly. "Where's Anderson?"

"I'll get him on the video," said Schultz, smiling. "He'll be delighted to learn that we pulled you out of that mess." He slapped me on the back. "You have Belov to thank for it."

Bragden grabbed my hand, and shook it enthusiastically. "I'm very grateful," he told me. "I owe you a great deal ; but the best way I can repay you is by proffering a piece of advice." He swung an arm towards the door. "Get the hell out of here, and keep going ! I'm turning the whole damn boiling in for what tantamounts to fraud, including myself. We've been living on the fat for years, and the first time we attempt anything creative it blows up in our faces. I see it as a kind of judgment. I promised myself that I'd make a clean breast of it if ever I got out of that geometrical nightmare." He closed his eyes, and clenched his fists in a paroxysm of horror. "I promised," he said.

Schultz essayed a sickly smile. "You don't have to keep your promise," he suggested, hopefully. "After all it was only to yourself."

Bragden turned to me. "He doesn't understand, does he?"

I did. Bragden meant it. That was enough for me. He had a fanatical edge to his voice. I know the type.

"I had no idea," I said, frowning at Schultz. "I thought everything was on the level." I ranged myself alongside Bragden. "You'll keep that in mind, won't you?"

"You're a liar !" Schultz rasped. "You knew all about it.. You were going to take that job knowing full well . . ."

"A man of my integrity?" I said. I was flabbergasted, I can tell you. As though old Belov would lend himself to anything even remotely dishonest, especially now that the skids were under it. "Have you noticed his close-set, mean, shifty little eyes?" I asked Bragden. "He's a villainous prevaricator. Ignore him."

I don't think I've seen Schultz move so fast ; but I was faster. I managed to get through and close the door just as the typewriter crashed into it.

I had to pass the "Kit Kat" restaurant, and on a sudden impulse I went in. I sat down at a table. Penny came up and glared at me.

"Hullo, sugar !" I smiled. "What's your aim like today ? I'm feeling a bit peckish."

Without a word she went into the kitchen and came out with a sandwich on a plate. She put it in front of me.

"I made that myself," she informed me, evenly, "and I dare you to eat it. Without opening it," she added, and I drew my hand back.

I forced a grin. "All right," I shrugged, and picked up the sandwich. "Geronimo !" I breathed.

My first impression was that it tasted a bit like jugged hare. She watched me until I had consumed the last crumb, and then a strange smile spread over her face. I had the feeling that I had undergone something equivalent to an ordeal by fire.

"Did you like it ?" she asked, sweetly.

I nodded, a bit doubtfully. "What was it ?" I asked.

"Decomposed bat," she said, still with that sweet smile.

I had a fleeting feeling of sickness ; but in for a Penny in for a pound, if you will forgive the pun. "The hell !" I said, recklessly. "Fetch me another."

She laughed, delightedly. If there's one thing a woman likes its *panache*. "You pass," she pronounced. "It wasn't a bit decomposed really. I'll get you something else. Something different."

How different, I wondered ? I smiled, and waved my hand airily ; but my nerve had broken. It occurred to me that there must be less wearing pastimes than playing Romeo to a girl like this. Playing last across the fast freight lane, for example, or jumping off one of the Levels. One thing I was certain of : I wasn't going to be there when she got back.

Outside I met an old friend.

"Belov !" he exclaimed. "What gives ? You look a bit white around the gills."

"I've been dining with Lucrezia Borgia," I told him. "Do you happen to have a stomach pump on you ?"

It was Jiffy's great day to go Outside, yet somehow, everything conspired against the great adventure

INSIDE

BY DAVID ROME

Oh, what a beautiful morning . . . Snuggie sang. He cuddled Jiffy, chucked his chin, tickled his little-boy face with his own big fat bear's face.

Shush ! whispered Bed. *Let him sle-eep . . .* But Jiffy fluttered his eyes, saw Snuggie bouncing and stifled a yawn with one sleep-wrinkled hand. "Jeepers ! What *time* is it ?"

Early, bounced the bear. *But a new day, Jiffy. A new day.*

New Day beamed on Jiffy from above. A pure blue sky with just a fleck of dawn light yet. My gosh, a sky so high he'd have to bounce Bed's springs right out to touch it !

He sat awhile, turned blind by the beauty of it all, until New Day crept her loveliest sun right out of Bed's head, so close he could *smell* it. My golly, what a day !

Zoom ! he went, through Washroom and Clothesroom, ducking and dodging, but coming out neat and dressed and decent, somehow, at the other end.

"Mom, we're on our way !" Scrubbed and shining, the bear at his side, he rushed to see the tardy sun push itself into his mother's sky. Then off again like a bird to see his father's New Day. He sat cross-legged, while Snuggie frolicked all around him, and watched the old red ball crank itself into the bedroom sky. It made a sound of little wheels running, and didn't quite get up to morning height before his father woke.

"That sun of yours is going to fall one day!" chirped Jiffy.

"Uh-huh," yawned his father. "Now be a good boy and run and play."

"And your New Day isn't blue anymore. It's grey. And the birds don't sing in your New Day!"

The birds don't sing in your New Day, Snuggie bounced.

"Your New Day is old!" Jiffy said sternly.

"So am I," said his father. "Now go and look Inside before I lose my patience."

He'll lose his patience, chortled Snuggie.

"And take that bear with you, Jiffy!"

Morning was the time to be up. Oh, yes! He danced downstairs and studied each New Day with a critical eye. "Your New Day's not so hot, dining-room," he charged. "Do better tomorrow! But, oh, yours is *fine*, viewing-room!"

Look Inside, look Inside, Snuggie burred. *Or your pop will wallop you!*

The bear jiggled from foot to foot as Jiffy ran to twist the dials. The whole room hummed. The first wall jack-boxed into life. A man was kissing his wife, as Breakfast Table popped their warm toast, squished their tea, spread golden jam and honey. *Ready now, all ready.*

"Mom!" cried Jiffy. "Those Jacksons are up! Shall I say hullo?" He skipped on the spot, one hand cupped to his ear. "Eh? Whaddyou say? I can't hear."

"Don't you dare say hullo! Just tell us what's happening, that's all!"

"What's happening? What's happening?" echoed Jiffy. He ran from one dial to the next, the walls flashed silver all around him. Snuggie stood on his head in excitement.

"Everything's happening. *Everything!*"

The room was alive with images and sound. Men, women, children, dogs, cats and bears. Eating, sleeping, creeping, crawling, until Snuggie toppled over in delight.

"Wow!" Jiffy yelled. "The whole world's awake!" He somersaulted into a struggling heap with Snuggie. "Oh, what a day. What a day!"

"What a day . . ." yawned his father, as they sat down to Breakfast Table. Jiffy and the bear perched side by side on the happy-chair. The chair was bouncing them gently, their

dangle-legs jiggling. Snuggie wore a bib round his neck and waved a spoon, like Jiffy. His blue-and-white bowl was half empty.

"Race you !" challenged Jiffy, pink cheeks bulging. His spoon was poised.

No, no, no, whispered happy-chair. *Eat slowly*,

"Eat slowly !" said his mother sharply, glancing up. Her hair was blue this morning, and Beauty Box had tickled pinkness into her cheeks. But she was tired. Spider-wrinkles webbed the darkness round her eyes. She sighed, and pushed her bowl away.

"I've got no appetite."

She yawned, pat-patting with her hand. "I wonder what's happening Outside today . . .?"

Happy-chair jiggled faster, jiggled until Jiffy almost bounced right out. "Hey !" Jiffy said. "Go easy, happy-chair."

We'll play such games today, Snuggie sang. *Pin-chaser, hob-de-gob, helter-skelter up and down the stairs.*

"You know," said Jiffy's father. "Today we really ought to visit."

"Why, yes," said mother. "We really ought."

"Yes, yes !" shouted Jiffy. "Let's visit the Jacksons !"

"It's so long since we walked through the town . . ." his mother murmured. And all of a sudden the tiredness was clearing from her eyes. "It seems so long since we actually did that. How long is it, dear ? A week ? A month ?"

"A year," father said. "Or more. I don't know. It's a long time. Yes ! today we'll go. We'll visit."

"Hurrah !" Jiffy hollered. "We're going to visit ! We're going Outside. We'll smell the world, see the sea, and touch the sky, way up !"

But Jiffy, Snuggie wailed. *We could play such games today.*

"Stupid games," Jiffy said. "We're going Outside !" He shrieked with sudden mingled joy and fright as happy-chair threw him clear in the air and he tumbled on his back on the floor. His head bobbed up, his eyes very big and bright, staring at his mom and his pop.

"You know . . ." he said slowly. "I don't really think I ever went Outside before."

Oh, the house buzzed with plans ! Mother fled up the stairs to turn out the stockings and flimsies, bright dresses and blouses. "A coat, a coat, shall I need a coat ?" she cried.

"Jiffy," said his father, hurrying to the Washroom. "Ask the Jacksons what it's like Outside. Is it hot or cold, grey or sunny. Ask them."

Cold, cold, Snuggie wailed. Oh, stay, and play.

"Out of my way!" Jiffy tooted. "Barooooomm!" He bowled the bear aside. Down the stairs with shirt tails flying. Into the viewing-room. He turned the dials until Mr. Jackson popped up on the screen. He was golfing with Emanuel around the upstairs links.

"Mr. Jackson, what's it like Outside? Should us visitors wear our coats?"

The man stared in at Jiffy, scratched his head and said, "You know, I can't just answer that. I haven't been Outside for so-o-o long, Jiffy."

It's cold, Emanuel said beside him. Very cold and grey.

"Well there you are," smiled Mr. Jackson. "Better leave it till another day."

Jiffy split his boy's face with a grin. "We'll wear our coats! Why, it might . . . it might . . . it might . . . Mr. Jackson, please, what *does* it do, Outside?"

It rains, Emanuel said. And snows. It's cold and windy and the mists come down.

"I'll love it!" Jiffy cried.

You won't. You won't.

"You're just a tin-man, 'Manuel. You wouldn't know!"

He spun the dials, the screen went grey. He ran back up the stairs. "Wear your coat, Mom! It's cold and windy and the mists are down."

He burst into Bedroom and found them sitting. "What's wrong? What's wrong? We'd better hurry!"

"Washroom isn't working," his father said. "I can't get washed."

"And Beauty-Box won't open," sighed his mother. "Dear oh, dear."

New Day beamed down on them. The sun was warm, the birds began to sing.

"Well," father said. "It can't be helped."

"No, no!" Jiffy cried. "We're going Outside!"

Oh, stay and play, Snuggie purred. We can have such fun.

"I want to walk through the town," Jiffy whispered. "Smell the world, see the sea."

Not today, not today.

"I've never seen Outside. I've never been Outside."

"You will," said his father. "Tomorrow."

"Or the next day," mother said.

We'll play such games today. Pin-chaser, hob-de-gob, helter-skelter up and down the stairs.

"Go away," Jiffy wept. "I don't want to play."

He trailed downstairs, the bear at his heels. *Please, Jiffy, play !* the bear pleaded.

"Go away !"

He turned the dials in the viewing-room, and Mr. Jackson came to life again. He checked his drive to smile Inside.

"Hullo, Jiffy. Not on your way yet, then ?"

"Can't come," Jiffy sniffed. "Not today."

"Tch, tch. Never mind. Tomorrow perhaps."

Or the day after that, said Emanuel, smiling.

"I want to know !" Jiffy said. "I want to know what it's like Outside !"

There's no New Day . . . Snuggie wailed. Oh, not a single New Day.

Emanuel spoke from the screen. *Shush, old bear. Shush.* But tears ran down the fat bear's face.

Jiffy, it's so lo-o-nely Outside . . .

Be quiet, bear ! snapped Emanuel.

You couldn't play . . . Snuggie wailed. The grass is gone, the trees are burned awa—

SNUGGIE ! Emanuel cried. He took a sharp step forward. Then something happened to the bear. Its head made a big sound, and its legs and arms began to kick. Suddenly its old heart was rattling, the cogs and wheels and wires were shivering to a halt. The wide eyes clicked shut finally. The fat fur body toppled. So far, so far ! Limp and loose, no life, no sparkle, no delight. The bear lay slackly with its fixed steel grin.

And Jiffy screamed.

He pulled the cloth and wire animal close against him, squeezed and squeezed to warm those eyes again. The dead toy's legs hung limp, the glass eyes stared, the moist nose dried to polished rubber.

"Snuggie, Snuggie."

His mother and father hurried down the stairs. He showed them Snuggie, and his mom cluck-clucked with her tongue.

His pop took the bear and held it upside down. He shook the slack body and the wheels inside the head turned jerkily.

Jiff-y, it-s so lo-oooo—

"Well, you got good wear out of it. We can't complain," his father said. "Go and put it in the Toy Cupboard. Ask for something else."

"But what's *wrong* with him?"

"He's run down. He's broken. Don't worry, Toy Cupboard will give you something nice, something new."

"But I don't *want*—"

"That's enough!" his father said. "Give it to me!" He took the bear from Jiffy's arms, and turned to the man on the screen. "Won't be a moment," he said.

"Snuggie, Snuggie," whispered the boy, as his father left the room.

Mr. Jackson smiled comfortingly. "Jiffy, there'll be something nice in there for you. Just wait. You'll see."

Above the boy's head sunlight flooded warm and bright. Emanuel smiled, a grand tin-man, ten times as tall as Jiffy could ever be.

See, Jiffy. Now it's warm and bright. A goo-od day.

A tear rose in the boy's eyes and tumbled down his cheek.

"We were going Outside today. To *visit*."

Tomorrow, Emanuel said. *Or the next day.*

"Jiffy!" said his father, from the doorway. And the boy turned slowly. A big red-spotted dog capered at his father's feet.

Hullo, Jiffy. Hullo!

"Well, now then," mother smiled. "You run and play, Jiffy."

Run and play, run and play, Emanuel whispered. *Pin chaser, hob-de-gob, helter-skelter up and down the stairs.*

"Come and play, Jiffy!" his father said.

The dog was holding out its paws to him. New Day was blushing her prettiest pink for him. Somewhere there must be warmth to fill the aching emptiness inside him.

Slowly, with a sob, he moved toward the dog.

"Hullo, Snuggie . . ." he whispered.

But it wasn't the same. Oh, it wasn't the same!

—David Rome

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